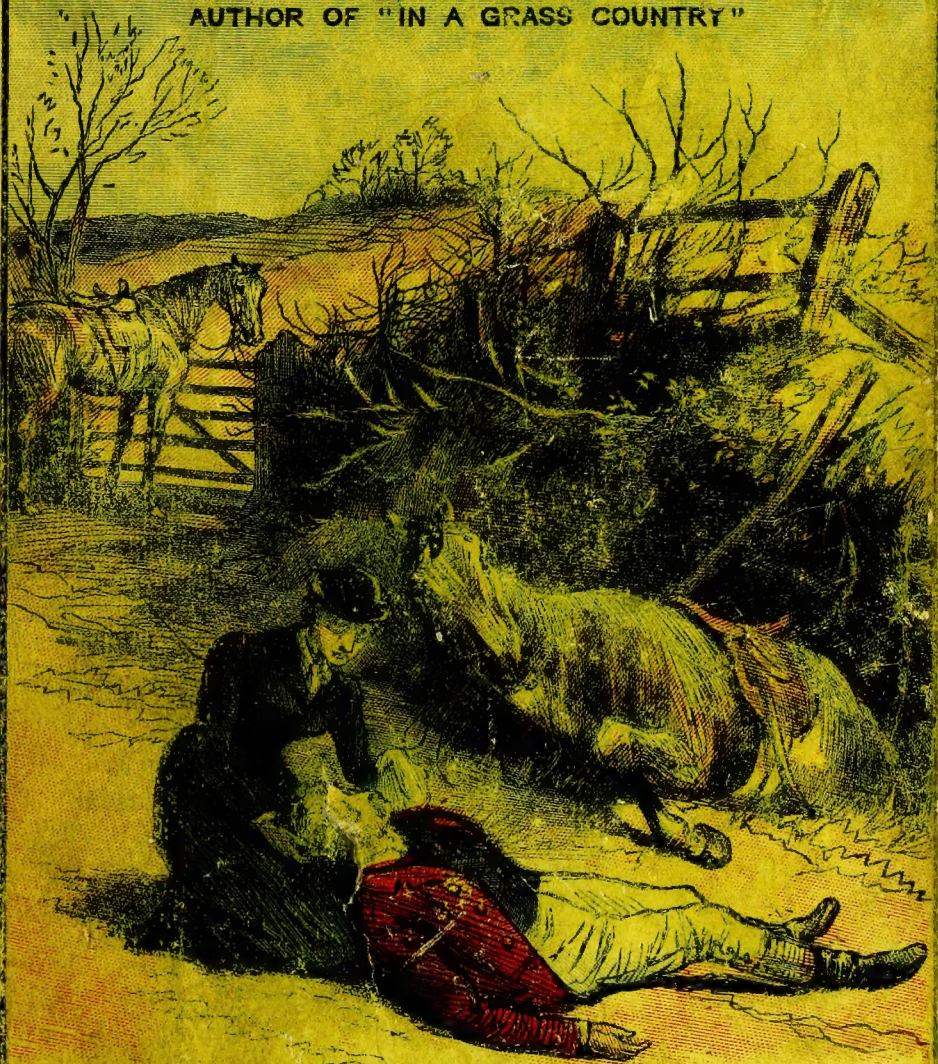


WEAK WOMAN

BY MRS LOVETT CAMERON

AUTHOR OF "IN A GRASS COUNTRY"



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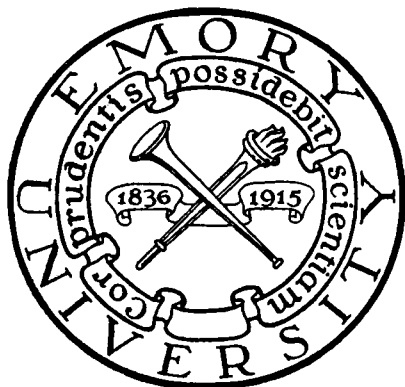
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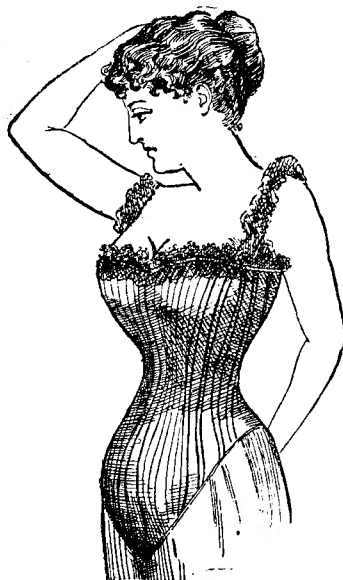
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WEAK WOMAN.

WEAK WOMAN

A Novel

BY

MRS. LOVETT CAMERON,

AUTHOR OF

“IN A GRASS COUNTRY,”

“A SISTER’S SIN,” “JACK’S SECRET,”

ETC., ETC.

“And if weak women went astray,
Their stars were more in fault than they.”

—MATTHEW PRIOR.

THIRD EDITION.

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F V. WHITE & Co.,

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—THE PUPIL TEACHER	1
II.—GREAT NEWS	9
III.—LIFE AND LIBERTY	16
IV.—OLDPARK	24
V.—A NEW FRIEND	33
VI.—LEARNING TO RIDE	42
VII.—THE OLD LOVE	51
VIII.—ACROSS COUNTRY	59
IX.—IN COMMON HUMANITY	68
X.—“I WILL NOT LET YOU GO”	75
XI.—DOUBTS	83
XII.—THE NEW LOVE	91
XIII.—LORD BAINTON GOES TO A BALL	99
XIV.—“YES OR NO?”	107
XV.—MR. WARNE RECEIVES A BLOW	114
XVI.—A SECRET ALLIANCE.	123
XVII.—DORA’S SONG	130
XVIII.—GOOD-BYE	139
XIX.—CONSPIRATORS	146
XX.—THE PLOT THICKENS.	155

CHAP	PAGE
XXI.—“I WILL NEVER FORGIVE YOU”	162
XXII.—PERSECUTION	170
XXIII.—FLIGHT	178
XXIV.—HER ONLY FRIEND	186
XXV.—MR. WARNE THREATENS	192
XXVI.—MRS. DELASTAIR’S ADVICE	199
XXVII.—HARSH JUDGMENTS	207
XXVIII.—MAY AND DECEMBER	215
XXIX.—THE SECOND WILL	222
XXX.—TOO LATE	230
XXXI.—A LAST PARTING	236
XXXII.—A MOVE TO LONDON	243
XXXIII.—LADY CAMILLA IS TEMPTED	252
XXXIV.—A LAST EFFORT	259
XXXV.—MR. WARNE LOSES HIS TEMPER	267
XXXVI.—MRS. HOGAN RELIEVES HER CON- SCIENCE	274
XXXVII.—DORA’S “SECOND STRING”	281
XXXVIII.—ON THE RIVIERA	288
XXXIX.—TED REBELS	295
XL.—LORD BAINTON’S LAST WILL	303

WEAK WOMAN.

WEAK WOMAN.



CHAPTER I.

THE PUPIL TEACHER.

"In maiden meditation fancy free."

—SHAKESPEARE.

"HELEN!"

There was no answer. Miss Fairbrother glanced up at the old French clock on the high mantel-shelf, then back at the crouching figure in the window-seat; but the bent, brown head never moved. Miss Fairbrother waited a moment and then she spoke again—in that quiet, well-balanced voice that was part of herself.

"Helen, my dear, if you are going to the station to meet Frederick it is quite time for you to get ready."

The girl lifted her head with a start; her grey eyes were dazed and dreamy, her lips were parted vaguely—her mind was evidently far away, still wrapped up in the fortunes of the heroine of her book.

"I—I beg your pardon, Miss Fairbrother—did you speak to me?"

"I called your attention to the hour, my love; it is time for you to get your hat—I spoke twice," added the old lady with gentle reproach.

Helen Dacre flushed a little guiltily, and rose hastily to her feet. She was a tall girl—tall and slight, with a small, thorough-bred head and a

slender neck ; there was something fine and distinguished about her ; it was not exactly beauty—for her features were far from perfect, but there was a subtle grace in her movements and that nameless charm called fascination, which it is always difficult to define, but which often produces a more distinct effect in its own way than does actual beauty. For the rest, her eyes, which were her best point, were large, and of a deep shadowy grey, whilst her mouth was essentially womanly—that is to say it was tender and tremulous, but a thought weak and irresolute in outline—a sweet mouth—with no very decided character about it.

As she rose to her feet, the novel she had been reading slipped with a little clatter on to the polished floor, whilst her hands—long-fingered, blue-veined hands, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds used to love to paint—went up half-nervously to smooth her ruffled nut-brown locks.

“My dear, you have dropped your book,” said the old schoolmistress reprovingly. “Pray be more careful ; how often I have told you——”

“I am sorry, Miss Fairbrother,” said Helen, almost mechanically, as she stooped to pick up the fallen volume. It was necessary to be “sorry” very often in Miss Fairbrother’s company, there were so many little things which jarred all day long against the good lady’s principles of order and propriety.

“I did not see that it was so late,” she continued apologetically, as she came forward out of the window corner, “I will go at once.”

“I very much regret the infirmity which prevents my accompanying you in your walk, my love ; were it not for that, I should not, of course, allow you to go alone across the Common—it may indeed be an actual dereliction of duty on my part,” added the old lady, doubtfully ; but Helen broke in quickly with a bright little smile :

"Pray do not distress yourself, dear Miss Fairbrother, I know you would come if you were a better walker; as it is, no harm can possibly happen to me."

"No, that is true, and dear Frederick is so steady, so superior—so unlike all other young men, that I feel there can, in this case, be no impropriety in permitting you to walk alone with him."

"None whatever, I should think," replied Helen somewhat drily, as she left the room.

When she was outside the door, she laughed outright.

"Poor, dear Miss Fairbrother!" she said half aloud. "For two whole years she has said the same thing every time that Frederick is coming down! I suppose it is a salve to her conscience! But as to Frederick! Oh, *could* Frederick Warne say or do anything improper, under any provocation whatever, I wonder!"

Outside, beyond the high red brick walls, mellow with age and lichen, which shut in Miss Fairbrother's old-fashioned Georgian mansion within its peaceful garden precincts, lay the wide breezy Common, glowing like a land of gold in the slanting rays of the setting sun. The gorse bushes were still powdered over with yellow blossom, whilst half-withered bracken fronds of every shade, from deepest browns and crimsons to palest saffron, clothed the broad level space with the glory of the September colouring. All around the Common, but so far away in the tender evening light as not to be inharmonious to the landscape, circled a fringe of houses—some, indeed, were smart new villas, with trim gardens in front of them, and white painted gates and railings, but mostly they were quite old houses, nestling soberly amongst tufted trees, or hiding themselves in dignified seclusion behind high walls that had stood about them for a century or more. Crossing the Common

from north to south, ran a fine white line, the high road that led from great London, not ten miles away, down into the peaceful heart of the country beyond; whilst at the far eastern corner of the heath, an incongruous blot upon the peaceful scene, was the railway station and its out-buildings.

It was something to be out of doors, to be free, away from the shadows of the old red brick house with its grey stone copings, and beyond its high walls and ponderous iron gates. Helen had never loved it. It had been her home for seven years, yet she had never ceased to regard it as a prison. She remembered well the day when she had first come to it. Her father was dead, her guardian, who was almost a stranger to her, and whom she had never seen since, had brought her down in a cab from London and had delivered her over into Miss Fairbrother's charge. She was only thirteen, a lanky, awkward girl, with big sad eyes and a pale, solemn face. She had not shed a single tear—not one—only as the high wrought-iron gates had clanged harshly together behind her, she had said to herself in her desolate child-heart that they were prison doors which were shutting her in for evermore from the stir and bustle and life of the world outside.

In all the years that had gone by she had never entirely lost that feeling; not even now, when she was twenty, and no longer Miss Fairbrother's pupil, but her right hand and lieutenant in the school; when, too, she was engaged to be married, and might reasonably expect to have a home of her own before long.

Yet, somehow, freedom was the dream she still dreamt of—freedom to do as she liked and go where she pleased—to see the world as others did, to taste of its joys and its pleasures, of its sorrows even, so long only as she might extend her sphere of knowledge!

And this freedom, after which she had yearned so intensely, did not seem likely to come to her in any fashion, or from any direction that she could possibly descry. No, not even through the door of marriage or through Frederick Warne!

Helen, when she got out upon the Common, well away from the shadow of Aberdare House, did not hurry herself in any way; on the contrary, she walked slowly and dreamily, as one who seeks to prolong the moments that are passing, and is in no haste to squander them away. Her eyes were bent upon the ground, and all her thoughts were still full of that happy heroine of her story-book, whose lot—full of tragic excitement as it was—seemed to her to be so infinitely enviable!

And yet she must have known that the train which was bringing Frederick Warne was even now due at the station!

Assuredly, there was very little of the keenness of a woman who is beloved and who goes forth eagerly to meet her lover in her lagging footsteps!

It was the last day of the summer holidays; to-morrow all the girls were coming back, and Aberdare House would be full of noise and chatter from attic to cellar. Then good-bye to peace and to dreamy musings, to story-books and to castles in the air! Helen sighed a little as she thought of it.

The evening sun behind her threw a long shadow of her tall figure in front of her, and so absorbed was she in her own thoughts as she walked slowly along, with her eyes bent upon its fantastic flickerings preceding her along the grassy footpath, that it was with quite a start that, upon reaching the high road, she looked up suddenly to find herself within a few hundred yards of a very whirlwind of noise and commotion—a brilliant vision out of that unknown world of life and pleasure into which her lonely feet so often longed to enter.

A coach was coming rapidly along the road towards her. The yellow wheels whirled in the sunshine, a cloud of dust filled the air behind it, the four chestnut horses groomed into the shine of satin, came trotting smartly along; there was a sound of clanking bars and bits, and of jingling harness, the even ring of hoofs and the rumbling of the heavy vehicle behind them, and above all the sound of merry voices and light laughter from the gay group of men and women who were seated together upon it.

Helen Dacre, upon the edge of the dusty road, stood still to watch this beautiful sight as it passed by. Gazing intently up into the faces above her, she saw a handsome man with blue eyes and an auburn moustache upon the box, and beside him a small, fair woman in a shining white dress and a smart hat covered with pink roses. Behind them sat other happy-looking and well-dressed men and women, but these she did not see so well; it was the man who was driving and the lady by his side that filled her eyes, in that brief moment in which they flashed by her—and then the man, glancing carelessly aside, saw her too, and their eyes met.

In the days that were to come, Gilbert Nugent was destined to remember that moment. The level Common, the golden glow of the sunset, and the slender solitary figure of the girl in her shabby dress, standing up tall and graceful in strong relief against the red light of the evening sky behind her, formed a picture whose strange and curious charm never quite faded from his memory.

In another moment the vision was over; the vague glimpse into an unknown future had vanished; the coach, with its spanking team and gay load, was gone; and Helen, in her grey frock, stood alone by the roadside looking somewhat sadly after the cloud of dust in which it was whirled away from her sight.

And she never even saw another lowlier vehicle which followed it along the road—a hansom cab with an elderly gentleman sitting inside it—and yet, of the two, if she had but known it, the hansom ought to have been by far the most interesting to her.

By the time it passed, Helen was away on the heath again, and a man, carrying a Gladstone bag in his hand, was advancing rapidly towards her along the grassy path.

“You are late, my dear; I was quite disappointed not to find you waiting upon the platform.”

Somehow, the voice, the tone, the implied reproof, were all exactly like Miss Fairbrother.

“I am here, at any rate, now,” answered the girl carelessly, as she shook hands and turned round with him.

Frederick Warne was Miss Fairbrother’s nephew, her dead sister’s son, and in the eyes of his aunt, at any rate, he was a very prince amongst men. Whatever might be the virtues of his character—and no doubt they were inestimable—as a man, he was not much to look at. A pale, freckled complexion, sandy hair and eyebrows, and a short ginger-coloured beard and moustache, behind which the thin lips of a somewhat mean and obstinate mouth were but scantily concealed. Narrow, stooping shoulders and a hollow chest, and that sort of shambling gait and figure upon which a first-rate West-end tailor might have expended his whole energies in vain. Such was the outward appearance of the man whom Helen Dacre had promised to take for her lord and master!

When they stood, as now, side by side, he was shorter than she was, and a casual passer-by would scarcely have taken them to belong to the same rank of life. And yet Frederick Warne was

placidly and serenely unconscious of any shadow of disparity between himself and his promised wife! Indeed, if he had given any thought at all to the matter, it would have been unhesitatingly to pronounce the balance in his own favour. Helen, as his aunt was always telling him, was young and unformed—her mind was ill-balanced, and all her good impulses came by fits and starts! But what a fortunate girl she was to be the chosen wife of such a one as Frederick Warne! So high-principled, so steady and so richly endowed with all the cardinal virtues! Under such guidance and with such a life's companion, Helen's faults must surely become eradicated and her character derive strength and elevation. Miss Fairbrother often enlarged on this theme to him, indeed she frequently told him, that in a measure he was undoubtedly throwing himself somewhat away.

It was no wonder perhaps that the young man, in spite of half-hearted denials, believed it to be the case. But he made excuses for Helen, and flattered himself that he was gifted with a mission—the mission to mould and to perfect the faulty nature of this attractive young girl who had confided her future to his hands.

Frederick Warne was a schoolmaster. In that statement perhaps lies the whole explanation of his character. A schoolmaster is by training, by habit, by the natural force of the circumstances of his existence, more dictatorial and more imbued with a sense of his own importance and of the inferiority of other people than any other man on earth!

It is perhaps unavoidable that he should be so. The constant habit of teaching, of correcting and of suppressing those under his charge imparts to his whole moral nature an unconscious tinge of self-sufficiency. He feels himself to be a superior being, sent into the world purposely to set other people to rights. Being unaccustomed to contra-

diction, he is unable to brook it; that anybody should dare to differ from him or to set up opinions in opposition to his own, strike him as an impertinence—as a sacrilege almost! and it follows very often that the world, that is apt to take us at our own valuation, smiles in its sleeve, and good-naturedly allows him to believe himself to be infallible.

CHAPTER II.

GREAT NEWS.

“Gold! Gold!

In the very scheme of her dream it told
By magical transmutation.”

—HOOD.

FREDERICK WARNE was classical master at a large middle-class grammar school in the north of London. When his duties at St. Matthew's permitted him to do so, that is, on the two half-holidays of the week, he had been in the habit of coming down to his aunt's school on Cleare's Common in order to instruct the young ladies of her high-class establishment in the rudiments of the Latin language.

It was perhaps quite natural under the circumstances that Warne should have fallen in love with the tall dark-eyed pupil teacher, who shared the Latin lessons of the upper class, and whom he had watched grow from a shy child into a graceful, self-possessed woman. As far as in him lay, he was honestly and genuinely in love with her. He admired her dark grey eyes and the turn of her well-shaped head; he said to himself in his fatuous underbred mind that she “looked quite the lady,” and that she would do him credit. And there were other things besides—she knew how to teach—she might help him in his career—and she had forty pounds a year of her own. Forty pounds, regarded

as an annual income, is not perhaps much—but it is better than nothing, very decidedly better. It would pay for her clothes, it would help to keep the domestic pot boiling. All things considered, he might go farther and fare worse.

For certain, in all his limited experience, the poor young man had never come across anything one-half so sweet and fair as Helen Dacre. It was small wonder that he should have coveted her for his own.

What was wonderful about the matter was that Helen should ever have been brought to consent to his proposal. The prospects he had to offer her were not brilliant—his annual earnings were scarcely larger than her own small pittance; he could not afford to marry her at once—it had to be a waiting engagement, and the marriage was to be indefinitely deferred until his position in the world should be bettered. He had nothing therefore to offer her save his own dull and ungainly self—and most assuredly she did not love him.

When he had made his proposal in due form correctly and decorously, through the medium of his aunt—an event which had happened now nearly two years ago—a great many small things put together had induced Helen to give a reluctant consent to his offer. She was very tired of teaching; she fancied that marriage would mean an escape from her prison and from Miss Fairbrother's incessant admonitions. The good lady herself was loud in expressions of delighted amazement at her wonderful good fortune, and urged her to accept so unspeakable a blessing as Frederick Warne's affections promptly and with heartfelt gratitude—in fact she refused even to listen to the small doubts which poor Helen attempted timidly to put forward—shutting her eyes and shaking her head in horror over them as though they had been actual sins of the deepest dye. After she had spoken the fatal

word, Helen had certainly felt many degrees happier concerning her future, but did not experience much alteration in the condition of her present.

Frederick Warne was not an ardent lover. His courtship was conducted upon the most matter-of-fact principles, and if passion ever found a place in his sluggish soul he was careful, from a sense of duty, to suppress every outward exhibition of it. After the few first days of bewildered surprise Helen learnt to be very grateful indeed that it was so.

The lovers met invariably, as they had met upon the Common to-day—with a quiet handshake and a few conventional inquiries after each other's healths.

To-day, however, Frederick had something new to say to his lady-love, a great piece of news which he proceeded in his slow and pedantic way to communicate to her.

"I have something of great importance to tell you, my dear Helen—something that may materially alter my whole future prospects," he began.

"Indeed?" There was but a faint curiosity in her mind.

"I have been offered an appointment as classical master in the South London High School for girls."

"Really? Is it a good thing?"

"It would mean an increase of fifty pounds a year on my present income," answered Frederick, with importance, "and a lodging free of rent attached to the building."

"Should you live there then?" inquired Helen, absently, with her eyes fixed upon the red gold clouds in the western sky. Frederick Warne stopped short and faced her.

"I do not think you apprehend the importance of what I am saying, Helen. I had expected you

to take a greater interest in my career and to appreciate with keener intelligence the honour as well as the lucrative advantage which is to be given to me. With this appointment I shall be in a position to marry and offer you a home, this Christmas."

"Oh!" Helen was awake enough now. She turned on him two startled eyes. "Surely"—she stammered—"surely that is very soon?"

"Soon? When our engagement has lasted two years! I thought you would have been glad," he continued in a voice of mild reproach; "you do not seem glad at all."

"Forgive me," she murmured confusedly—"I—I—was surprised—I am glad—I suppose." For the moment she felt genuinely penitent.

Frederick Warne looked at her coldly. "You express yourself badly," he said in his formal schoolmaster voice, "and without self-control. It is wise always to reflect before uttering meaningless and broken remarks. We will talk of this matter again when you are calmer—with my aunt."

He pushed open the iron gates for her and Helen went in silently.

It is time to return to Miss Fairbrother. Soon after Helen had met her lover on the Common, the old schoolmistress, who had somehow fallen into a little doze by the chimney corner, suddenly became very wide awake, and sat bolt upright in her chair as the maid-servant opened the door behind her and announced in a voice of due importance:

"The Earl of Bainton, ma'am."

No more startling name could have broken in upon her repose. It was now seven years ago since Lord Bainton had brought to her the little girl whom his old friend Colonel Dacre had left to

his most reluctant guardianship. Years ago when Miss Fairbrother was still brisk and active, and comparatively young, she had been governess to Lord Bainton's sister, and when Lady Camilla Greyson heard that her bachelor brother had been saddled with a ward—a ward too with only forty pounds a year!—she had said to him in her off-hand way:

“Oh take the child down to old Fairbrother, she keeps a school now on Cleare's Common. She will educate her for forty pounds a year, and when she is old enough she can turn her into a pupil teacher and she will earn her own living. In that way you need never be bothered with her any more.”

Lord Bainton had thankfully taken his sister's advice. Although a kind-hearted man, he was somewhat selfish and indolent. He liked his own ways and his own life, and anything more disconcerting to him than to find himself the guardian of a female child it would be difficult to imagine. He thought it privately very inconsiderate of poor Dacre to have saddled him with such a bequest. Nevertheless, being a man of honour and of conscience, he felt himself compelled to do his duty by the child. He took Helen himself down to Aberdare House and confided her to the care of his sister's old governess.

Once a year he received a letter from Miss Fairbrother reporting his ward's progress, to which he invariably wrote an answer filled with polite and suitable if somewhat meaningless sentences, and when the time came for the girl to become a teacher instead of a pupil in the school, he notified his consent and approval of the change in her position. In addition he administered her small fortune carefully and judiciously, and invariably sent her a five-pound note at Christmas time as a present from himself. Lord Bainton did not con-

ceive that his duty as a guardian could possibly have been more conscientiously fulfilled.

That he should go down to Cleare's Common and personally inspect his ward had never entered into the scheme of his obligations towards her. Nor would he for a moment have imagined that he would be benefiting her by so doing. Her position in life was destined to be a lowly one. She was probably happy where she was—Miss Fairbrother at any rate assured him that she was. Of what advantage therefore to unsettle her by visits which could necessarily lead to nothing? She would have nothing to say to him, and most assuredly he would have nothing to say to her. As he remembered her, she had been awkward and ungainly—there had been nothing attractive at all about her; she had been a plain and dull child then—she was probably a plain and dull young woman now. He had no desire whatever to renew his acquaintance with her. But now something totally unforeseen had occurred, something which had most materially altered the whole complexion of the case.

A great many years before the date of this history there had been three friends together at Eton and at Oxford, who had been absolutely inseparable in their devotion to each other. When they left college and entered upon the battle of life, their paths had, as is generally the case, widely diverged from each other. Dacre went into the army and was ordered to India, where he married a penniless girl who died in her first confinement. Bainton in due course succeeded to his father's title and estates, whilst George Ashworth, the third of the trio, went out to seek his fortune in Australia, purchased for a song a small property, upon which gold was subsequently discovered, so that he eventually became a rich man.

Of the three, James Dacre was the only one who

married, and when Ashworth returned broken in health to England to enjoy such pleasures as his wealth might still bring to him, he returned only in time to be present at Colonel Dacre's funeral, and to shake Lord Bainton's hand once more across the open grave of their mutual old friend.

After that the two friends met often, and Ashworth was such a complete recluse owing to the fatal disease which had already undermined his life that he scarcely saw anyone else. He had one nephew—the son of a sister who was dead—and to this nephew he conceived an unconquerable dislike. Yet those about him took it for granted that this nephew would necessarily become his heir. Perhaps the young man himself took it for granted too, and showed that he did so too plainly. Anyhow, when the end came, as, after seven years of a long and painful illness, it came at last, George Ashworth's will was a complete surprise to everybody save his solicitor. The Earl of Bainton was named his sole executor, with a legacy of two valuable Gainsboroughs and some sketches by Turner which he had always admired; to the nephew was left five hundred pounds and a portrait of his mother by an inferior artist, and the whole of the rest of his fortune was devised unconditionally and unreservedly to a person whom he had heard of, but had never seen—Colonel James Dacre's orphan daughter.

Now this was the astonishing news which Lord Bainton had driven down all the way from Town in a hansom to impart to the schoolmistress at Aberdare House.

The story, wonderful as it was, took but a very few minutes to tell, and soon Miss Fairbrother was in possession of the main facts of the case.

Somebody—the good lady hardly knew who, save that he was an old friend of her father's—had died and left Helen thirty thousand pounds!

Poor Miss Fairbrother gasped for breath over the news.

"But—but——" she panted, "how is it possible, when he never saw her—never heard of her?"

"Pardon me, he had heard of her often, he used to enquire about her from me."

"And yet you left her here, Lord Bainton! a pupil teacher in my school! You never informed me that she would require special teaching and training so that she might be rendered fit to become the possessor of a large fortune!"

"You misjudge me, Miss Farebrother. Naturally, I knew nothing whatever of my poor friend's intentions with regard to his money. Had I been aware of them, I should certainly not have left Helen here so long. However, I am persuaded that my ward will do credit to your care and training," this Lord Bainton added with a bow and a polite smile. "And so now that it has become my duty to remove her to a wider sphere of life, I shall do so with all confidence in you—and in any case, her future is before her, and no harm has been done."

CHAPTER III.

LIFE AND LIBERTY

"Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow."

—BYRON.

IT was at this moment that Miss Fairbrother suddenly recollected Frederick Warne.

By a singular omission in her letters to Helen's guardian, she had never informed him of his ward's engagement. Lord Bainton had taken apparently so little interest in the girl, and had evidently desired to have so little personally to do with her, that she had always supposed, when the time came, he would be glad enough to learn that she had

found a respectable and suitable husband, who would take her entirely off his hands.

Somehow she had kept the little secret religiously from him, perhaps, at the very bottom of her heart not knowing quite how he might take it, and yet not doubting either that it would be easy to obtain his consent when Frederick's prospects should enable him to fix a date for his marriage.

Now, for the first time, Miss Fairbrother's conscience troubled her, whilst at the same time her worldly anxiety for her nephew's advantage led her secretly to rejoice; for how was this miraculous turn of the wheel of Fortune going to affect her nephew?

"It is all for the best," she told herself. "How was I to know that the girl would be an heiress? They can't blame me! Of course, had I known it I would not have allowed Frederick to pay his addresses to her, but there, it can't be helped now! and what a splendid match for dear Frederick to be sure!"

"I should like to see my ward," said Lord Bainton. "You have never described her to me, Miss Fairbrother. Tell me what she has grown into—what is she like?"

Miss Fairbrother shook her head doubtfully.

"She is very unformed still. You must not be too critical, Lord Bainton."

This was not promising. The Earl, who had a keen eye for beauty, felt disheartened.

"She was an ungainly-looking child, I remember," he remarked dubiously.

"She is very much what she was, I fear; everything with Helen is by fits and starts. She is impulsive—she lacks self-control. Sometimes she is abstracted and inattentive to what might improve her mind. Sometimes again she expresses her opinions crudely and unbecomingly for a young girl."

Lord Bainton laughed. "Oh, never mind her impulses and her opinions. I don't care a fig about that, Miss Fairbrother! What are her face and shape like? That is what is of most importance to a woman in the world, you know!"

At such a horrible and heterodox sentiment the schoolmistress shuddered! Here was indeed an upheaval of all her most sacred and cherished doctrines! She who for fifty years of a long and honoured career had preached from the self-same text to succeeding generations of maidens:

"Be good—be orderly—behave decorously. Never mind what your face is like so long as your principles are unassailable and your mind is modest and well-stocked with Christian virtues. To be good is better than to be pretty."

She had always impressed it upon them all, and perhaps they had believed her whilst they were with her; but then they had gone their ways into the wicked world without, and the wicked world had speedily taught them—the pretty ones particularly—quite a different kind of lesson!

Still Miss Fairbrother had gone perseveringly on with her little stereotyped sermon. And to-day she was told by a man—an old man too, who ought to have known better—that a girl's face and shape were of more importance to her than her mind!

Fortunately she was saved from the necessity of a reply to so terrible a statement—for the door opened and Helen herself entered, her tall and slender form concealing the shorter figure of a man who followed her through the doorway.

"Here is Helen, Lord Bainton," said Miss Fairbrother. "Helen, this is your guardian, Lord Bainton."

Lord Bainton rose to his feet. Amazement, bewilderment even, followed quickly by unbounded delight and admiration, coursed themselves rapidly across his keen and wrinkled features. He flushed

a little as he held out his hand to her—nothing had astonished him so much for many years. The little long-legged gawky girl of thirteen with heavy eyes and pale cheeks, with rough, lustreless locks and homely and irregular features, had disappeared. In her place there stood before him a tall and graceful woman—a woman with bewildering eyes and a delightful smile, with a rose flush upon the delicate cream tints of a rare and beautiful complexion, and with a head which she carried like a young queen. Such a metamorphosis had surely never been carried out before, thought Lord Bainton in his surprise and delight. Wherein he showed his ignorance of the curious and complex nature of female children, for sometimes the awkwardest and ugliest girls have been known to turn with a mysterious suddenness into the handsomest and most graceful of women.

What a fool he had been to be sure to neglect her so long! What a flower she was to have been allowed to blossom unseen till her twenty-first year in this wilderness! And then he saw her too through the glow of her new fortune, and that also helped no doubt to turn the scales in her favour in his mind!

“My dear,” he said, bending low over her slender long-fingered hand and raising it with old-fashioned gallantry to his lips, “you positively amaze me! What fairy godmother has turned the ugly little child I remember into the charming young woman I see before me now?”

No one in her whole life had ever told Helen that she was “charming” before. Miss Fairbrother never mentioned beauty in a woman, save to remark with disparaging contempt that it was “a snare”—whilst the lover, who should have worshipped at her shrine, had a fixed idea that a woman should be useful and dutiful, and that all braidings and adorings of her perishing person ought to be

religiously eschewed. Frederick had kept any admiration he might have secretly felt for Helen's personal appearance strictly to himself, no doubt, lest he should corrupt her mind with vanity, and so render her unfit to imbibe his own improving words with due and becoming humility.

No sweet and flattering words had ever fallen upon Helen's ears from the lips of the man who had chosen her to be his. Words which endear a man to a woman's heart, even though they be foolish and unreal, because by these she learns that whatever she may be to all the world besides, she is at least fair in his eyes.

The old man bowing over her hand was the first who had ever told her that she possessed the power to please by her face alone.

She threw a rapid frightened glance from one of her jailors to the other. Miss Fairbrother looked disapproving, but somewhat helpless, whilst Frederick was fairly and frankly angry.

Poor Helen felt she would be made to pay for this by-and-bye.

"You—you are too kind," she stammered to her guardian. "I am afraid—you—you flatter me."

"Not at all, my dear, not at all. A great many people will tell you what I do. If I had only known what my ward was like!—but there, I am the loser, and now I must make up for lost time. I am the bearer of a very important piece of news for you, my dear Helen," and then catching sight, for the first time, of Frederick Warne's shambling figure in the background, Lord Bainton turned to Miss Fairbrother, still retaining Helen's hand in his own, "I should like to see my ward alone, or with you only present, Miss Fairbrother; perhaps you will ask this gentleman if he will kindly leave us?"

There was a moment of embarrassment. Miss

Fairbrother rose to her feet. She trembled a little.

"I ought to introduce you, Frederick. This, Lord Bainton, is my dear nephew, Frederick Warne."

Lord Bainton bowed.

"Delighted to make Mr. Warne's acquaintance," he said, with a certain impatient *hauteur*. "I am sure that Mr. Warne will understand that I have a communication of a private nature to make to my ward, and that he will kindly——"

"You can have nothing to say to Miss Dacre, my Lord, which does not concern me," interrupted Warne, sternly. "Miss Dacre's affairs are mine."

Lord Bainton lifted a double eyeglass, which depended from a thin gold chain over his waistcoat, and fixing it upon his nose, he looked at Frederick Warne. This action of his had been known to have an exceedingly disconcerting effect upon its subjects. Frederick, probably because he was a schoolmaster, was not at all disconcerted, he merely turned to his aunt.

"Have you explained my position to Lord Bainton, aunt?" he enquired.

"No, not yet, my dear — I — I have not had time—I was about to do so, but——" Helen had never seen Miss Fairbrother so upset and so nervous.

"I will explain the thing myself to you, my lord," said Frederick, turning to Lord Bainton. The fact is I am engaged to your ward, and intend to be married to her at Christmas."

Lord Bainton was a thorough man of the world. To say that he was not taken aback, and very considerably so, would be untrue; but he was gifted with great resources, and to knock under before such a blow as this was not in him. Moreover, he had the wisdom of the serpent, and was not going to waste his breath in superfluous

indignation. He settled his eyeglasses more firmly upon his nose and replied :

"Oh, indeed ! very kind of you, I am sure."

Frederick, in sober earnest, believed that it was very kind indeed of him to express himself ready to marry such an insignificant person as Helen Dacre, so that Lord Bainton's sneer did not wither him up in the way which the great man intended it to do. He replied with a proud modesty :

"Having given my word to Miss Dacre, and being now in a position to marry, I am, of course, ready to fulfil my promises towards her."

"Most kind of you," repeated Lord Bainton, fervently. "There is, however, I might remind you, sir, a slight formality which you seem to have overlooked. I am Miss Dacre's guardian, and until she is twenty-one, Miss Dacre cannot marry without my consent. Miss Fairbrother has not thought fit to inform me of this interesting intention of yours——"

"Indeed, indeed, Lord Bainton," cried the poor lady in much distress. "I never for one moment supposed that you would disapprove of my nephew, or withhold your consent to Helen's marriage to him. He is a most excellent and high-principled young man, who bears, I assure you, a most unblemished character, and, of course, as things were——"

"Yes, my dear madam, no doubt ; but as things *are*, all such arrangements must necessarily be set aside. Mr.—Warne ? Ah, yes ! Mr. Warne will understand, I am sure, that things cannot be so satisfactorily settled for him as he seems to anticipate, when I inform him that Miss Dacre has been left a large sum of money, and now holds a totally different position in the world to that which she has hitherto done."

Helen uttered a little cry. She looked from one to the other with a bewildered air ; for a moment

or two she turned very pale and the room seemed to whirl round with her.

Lord Bainton pressed her hand and smiled reassuringly at her.

"There is nothing to alarm you, my dear, but your responsibilities are now increased, you must think things a little over before I can allow you to bind yourself to this gentleman. You must see the world. I have come to take you away. I want to introduce you to my sister, Lady Camilla Greyson. You must mix a little in Society, and learn to know your own mind."

"No mixing in Society, no knowledge of the world, ought to suffice to alter your duty towards me, Helen," said Warne, in a voice hoarse with unwonted agitation. "You have promised to marry me, I was ready to take you with nothing—or next to nothing—wealth should make no difference to you, your duty is the same——"

"We will leave duty out of the question, if you please, Mr. Warne," said Lord Bainton coldly, then turning with a smile towards Helen he drew her kindly towards him.

"My dear child, you shall do exactly as you like; if you prefer to stay with your friends here, you shall, of course, do so. On the other hand, if you will go upstairs now, and pack up your box, I will wait for you till you are ready, and take you back to London with me. I have sundry plans for your future life in my mind, and in the first instance I wish to introduce you to my sister, who is to meet us in Town to-morrow. Come, which will you do—stay here, or go away with me?"

Helen stood with downcast eyes and a beating heart. Her colour went and came; she looked a picture of charming irresolution. She was not really irresolute a bit; she had made up her mind instantly.

She was rich! What a world opened out before

her at the very word! Life and its unknown pleasures and delights, the life she had longed to taste, the joys she had read of in books but had often thought were never to be hers! And freedom, too! Freedom from drudgery and dullness and hard work! Oh, what a great and wonderful thing was this money that was to bring her all this! and what a veritable fairy prince was this delightful old gentleman who had come to carry her away into fairyland!

Only she did not wish to be unkind or ungrateful, so, though her eyes shone and her cheeks glowed with delight, it was in the demurest voice in the world that she answered at last.

"You must not think me unkind, Frederick, or ungrateful to you, dear Miss Fairbrother, but"—putting her hand timidly into her guardian's—"but, if you please, I should like to go with you, Lord Bainton."

CHAPTER IV

OLDPARK.

"Ladies spend their time in making nets."

—DEAN SWIFT.

LATE in the afternoon of a still, grey day in the following January, two ladies were seated, silently, one on either side of the hearth in the oak-panelled hall of an old country house in Meadowshire. Although it was nearly five o'clock and quite dark out of doors, they had as yet no other light save the warm glow of the flickering fire between them, which cast fantastic shadows upon the deers' antlers and ancient weapons that hung upon the sombre walls, upon the tiger-skins and eastern rugs stretched upon the polished floor, and upon the quaint cabinets and bureaux which were ranged at intervals around the room. At the

further end, opposite the fireplace, a wide staircase with a heavily carved oak balustrade stretched dimly upwards into the gloom above, whilst two figures in armour, one on either side at the base of it, seemed to keep watch over the stillness, and harmonised weirdly with the old-world surroundings over which they presided.

Between the two ladies, whose dresses reflected the firelight, but whose faces were in the shadow, a little modern tea-table set out with pink and white cups and saucers had been placed ; but this frugal meal was evidently quite over, for the cups were empty and all the bread and butter eaten up.

Presently, from some shadowy corner behind them, where a tall French marquetric clock had stood ticking life solemnly away for generations, five o'clock rang out with clear and bell-like chimes into the stillness of the house.

"Five o'clock !" exclaimed the lady to the right of the fire, sitting up a little in her chair, so that the red light caught her face, which was fair and small and delicate. "How you do love this owl's light, Camilla ! How silent we have been—will they not soon be here ?"

"Not for another half-hour," answered the other in a deep, full voice, "although perhaps we had better have the lamps, and I can order some fresh tea to be made for them," and Lady Camilla put forth her hand to touch the bell.

"Do they come only from Town to-day ?"

"No, straight through from Paris."

"And what is she like ?"

"Well, you know, I have only seen her once. It was in September ; my brother telegraphed to me to meet him in Town. I went up and found them at the Alexandra Hotel ; the house in Portman Square was shut up ; he had just brought her up from the school where she had been living. I only stayed the night. Bainton wanted me to take

her off his hands—so like a man, you know, anything to save themselves trouble! It annoyed me at the time; I thought it so selfish of him and I refused. Now, I wish——” and she rounded off the sentence with a sigh.

“You wish that you had kept the game in your own hands?” suggested Mrs. Torrington with a little laugh.

“Exactly,” replied her hostess, without, however, a shadow of a laugh in her answer.

The servants came in with the lamps, the old hall became illuminated with a mellow radiance. When the men had removed the tea things and had retired, Mrs. Torrington repeated, with gentle persistence:

“Well, but what was the girl like? Is she pretty?”

“Not exactly, although she has fine eyes and a good figure; it is more a look of distinction.”

“Is not that strange, as she is a nobody?”

“Not altogether. Colonel Dacre was a man of excellent family, although his wife was more than I can tell you.”

There was another little silence. Mrs. Torrington, who was a pretty little woman of about five-and thirty, with a pink and white rosebud face and fair fluffy curls, which made her look much younger than her age, warmed her small toes reflectively, holding them out one after the other to the blazing logs upon the hearth.

“And you think that Bainton will—?” she began at last, slowly and enquiringly.

Lady Camilla sprang to her feet with an exclamation of impatience.

“How can I tell what Bainton will or will not do, my dear? I only know that he is infatuated with the girl! He has devoted himself to her for three months, giving up his hunting in order to take her about half over Europe. The Wiltons

travelled with them ; for propriety's sake, I suppose, though why, when a man is sixty years of age, he may not go about with a girl of twenty unattended by a chaperone, is more than I can understand ! and then his letters about her ! you should see them ! pages of ravings ! I never knew Bainton take so much trouble or get so excited about anything in petticoats before. It *is* hard, when I've looked upon him as a confirmed bachelor for years, and he has almost told me that Ted was to be his heir, as of course, he ought to be."

"Miss Dacre has thirty thousand pounds has she not ? Your brother can't want her money—he has plenty."

"Oh, it's not her money, of course."

"Still, it seems a pity not to keep it in the family. Can't you marry her to Ted ?"

"Don't be foolish, Dora ! Ted is sixteen. Of course if he had only been older, it would have been the thing to do. But, thank Heaven, the case is not yet hopeless—that is why——"

"That is why you have offered the heiress a home ?"

"Yes ; and naturally Bainton won't stay here long, he and Tom don't get on, you know. When I get her here alone I shall probably be able to manage something—in fact, I have a little idea already."

"Indeed ?" Mrs. Torrington's heart began to beat. She knew what Lady Camilla's little idea was.

The elder woman cast a furtive glance at her.

Dora Torrington was her husband's cousin. She was a widow and she was poor. Lady Camilla had always liked her and been kind to her : when Dora had nowhere else to go, Oldpark was always open to her ; but in many ways Lady Camilla disapproved of her cousin by marriage. There were things about her life she hated, and would gladly

have seen altered. Yet, somehow, Dora, though she was so small, and fair, and childish-looking, and though she was a good fifteen years and more younger than her own mature self, was a person with whom it was very difficult to interfere. That was why Lady Camilla looked at her askance now, and hesitated to say what was in her mind.

Mrs. Torrington would not help her. She sat obstinately silent, staring into the flames—although her heart was beating, she was outwardly quite calm and composed. Of course she knew what was coming—had they not been fencing round and about this subject the whole afternoon? As Lady Camilla meant to speak, she had to do so at last unassisted.

“I thought about Gilbert Nugent—” she said, hesitatingly.

“Naturally you did,” replied Dora still staring into the fire.

Lady Camilla breathed a little more freely.

“Well, my dear, I am sure I am very glad you say so. We must all feel that poor Gilbert was badly treated, and this money of old Ashworth’s ought to have been his. I really do think it would be the most natural thing in the world if we could bring about a marriage between him and the girl who has defrauded him of his fortune.”

“You are so clever, Camilla! the scheme is quite too charming! I only see two objections to it. To begin with, Gilbert hates girls——”

“Oh, my dear!” laughed Lady Camilla, “that sort of phase never lasts; when a new influence arises in a man’s life, those kind of fancies don’t go for much! If that is all——!”

“No, it is not all. You forget that I mentioned another objection.”

“So you did. What is it?”

“That Gilbert Nugent belongs to me.”

“Lady Camilla positively stamped.

"How angry you do make me Dora, by such a remark as that! How *can* a man who is neither your husband, nor your lover, nor even your cousin, be said to 'belong' to you? In what sense, pray, does he 'belong' to you?"

Mrs. Torrington laughed aloud.

"You will be the death of me, Camilla! Pray don't look so shocked. I am going to say something far worse. I have got a lease of Gilbert Nugent—a lease of ten years."

"How perfectly disgusting! I do not understand your meaning in the very slightest—perhaps indeed I had better not enquire?"

"Oh, yes, indeed you may! I am going to explain it to you—it is perfectly proper, I assure you!"

"Go on," said Lady Camilla, coldly and severely.

"Seven years ago——" began her cousin.

"That is, when Gilbert Nugent was twenty-one, and the breath was only just out of poor Jim Torrington's body."

"Exactly. Pray don't interrupt me. Seven years ago Gilbert Nugent gave me a written promise on paper—which I possess now—that he would not marry anybody for the space of ten years on the chance of either of us coming into enough money to enable us to marry one another; after that period has elapsed, he is free to do as he likes."

"How thoroughly ridiculous? Do you call yourself engaged to him then?"

"Certainly not. It's not an engagement. It is a covenant."

"But you will never have any money, either of you, now that his only chance is lost, and his uncle has left him nothing."

"Never. You are perfectly right."

"Then you will never marry him?"

"Never. I do not expect it. Only there are three years more of our lease to run, and I don't mean to let him go till they are expired," answered Mrs. Torrington, with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"Well, of all the cruel, selfish, wicked arrangements I ever heard of!" exclaimed Lady Camilla, indignantly—"of what possible use can it be to you to keep that wretched young man bound to you in such a fashion?"

"Of every use. Gilbert is handsome and popular, and although he has barely sufficient income to keep himself in clothes; he goes everywhere. He drives and rides other men's horses, shoots other men's game, fishes in other men's rivers—and does it all better than anybody else. I like having such a man in attendance on me—for when I am present he always devotes himself to me."

"And yet he is not in love with you?"

"Not in the least—*now*. But he is fond of me—and—he is used to me."

"And for that you would stand in his light, and prevent him from making a happy marriage?"

"Of course. Why not? Am I not as important in the economy of creation as Gilbert Nugent? Why should I put myself on one side for him?"

Then Lady Camilla Greyson made one of the truest observations she had ever given utterance to in her life.

"Then, my dear," she said, "you cannot love him very much!"

"Perhaps not," answered Dora, a little bitterly, after a moment's pause. "What is the use of wasting love on a man? One gives them gold—they pay one back in silver gilt! We abnegate ourselves in a life's devotion, and they tire of us in a few years! Oh, my dear Camilla, you are older than I am—but I have lived far longer, and learnt

far more ! Your dear good Tom never, I am sure, gave you a moment's anxiety. You do not know what it is to harden and harden day by day, year by year—till one is as hard as granite !”

“But, Dora, that is very wrong——”

“Very likely. Everything is wrong. Life is wrong. Love is more wrong than all else. One ought to begin where one ends—in impassibility !”

There was a moment's silence. The tall clock ticked on evenly and drearily, the logs fell in with a little crash. Lady Camilla thought about Lord Bainton's infatuation for Helen Dacre and her Eton boy's threatened prospects—and Dora Torrington sat looking for a moment dumbly and blindly into the dead ashes of her lost youth.

Perhaps an angel had passed by touching her soul with a passing warmth—but if so, the holy visitant's stay was short. With a little shiver she roused herself—the dream light went out of her blue eyes—the sad and bitter curve from her rose-tinted lips ; she shook her head as though to banish unavailing thought, and turned gaily to her cousin.

“So you see, Camilla, it will be wiser to leave our mutual friend out of your calculations. I can't possibly help you in making matches for Gilbert Nugent !”

“It is very selfish of you, Dora, and very useless too,” replied Lady Camilla, crossly ; “because if Gilbert falls in love with Miss Dacre or with anybody else, your written promise will become so much waste paper ! When the temptation comes to him you will see——”

“Oh, Gilbert is very loyal—he never walks into temptation, and I take the greatest care never to send him into it.”

“Ah—well, we shall see next week,” remarked Lady Camilla airily.

“How do you mean—next week ?”

‘He is coming here ; I have invited him.’

“To meet this heiress?”

“No—to meet *you*, of course!” was the mocking answer.

There followed a moment during which Dora Torrington hated her cousin’s wife with all her heart and soul.

But before she could find words to express her anger and indignation there came a sound of carriage wheels advancing rapidly towards the house.

“Here they are!” cried Lady Camilla, springing to her feet ; then, holding out her hand to her companion, “Come, Dora, don’t be cross! I dare say Nugent won’t like the girl at all—only *do* help me to turn Bainton’s mind from her—flirt with him yourself if you like! Only think what a calamity it would be if he married her, and poor Ted were to be cut out! Do, like a good girl, stand by me”

“Why should I? Do your worst,” answered Dora, somewhat tragically.

“On the contrary, I shall do my best,” replied her hostess. “Ah! my dearest brother, here you are at last!” She hurried forward to the hall door, which the servants had thrown widely open, and through which there entered Lord Bainton in a thick coat, with a travelling cap tied over his ears, followed closely by a tall and slender girl wrapped in a long fur mantle ; her face was pale, her large eyes peered from the darkness without a little eagerly and anxiously into the warmly-lit house, and at her heart there was a vague tremor which she could not account for or understand, at finding herself at last in the home of her guardian’s sister.

Thus it was, that Helen Dacre on that chill January evening, crossed the threshold of the house where the story of her life was destined to be played out.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW FRIEND.

"Here's my hand.
And mine, with my heart in't."

—SHAKESPEARE.

WHEN Helen looked out of her bedroom window the next morning she saw before her the undulating slopes of the park, dotted with clumps of fine trees and bounded by the brown and leafless woods which surrounded the old house.

Oldpark, like three-fourths of the Tudor houses of England, lay low in the shelter of a gentle hollow, with round swelling hills on every side of it. It was a solid-looking house forming three sides of a square, and built of grey stone, with mullioned windows and heavy chimney stacks; all round it were terraced gardens, divided into partitions by close-trimmed yew hedges cut at intervals into quaint shapes of birds and beasts. The gardens were empty now, and the brown beds, denuded of their summer glories, lay dreary and lifeless beneath the leaden winter skies; a chill mist hung over the distant woods and the hollows of the park. Helen, who had heard much about the beauty and grandeur of Lady Camilla's home, drew back from the window with a sense of disappointment—she recalled the blue skies of Italy, beneath which she had been lately wandering as in fairy land, and wished herself back there—and she shivered a little as she turned her eyes away from the misty landscape. Curiously enough, she thought at that moment of something which for nearly four months she had cleverly contrived

almost to forget altogether. She thought about Frederick Warne.

Her life was so entirely altered that she had succeeded lately in never thinking about him at all. The excitement of her sudden access of wealth, the rapid changes of scene she had undergone—the surprise and delight of finding herself no longer a despised and dependent pupil teacher, but a person of importance to whom many people were attentive, and all were kind and flattering—had produced a great and wonderful change in Helen's mind and character. It seemed to her that she had realized at one stroke all the vague and suppressed aspirations of her girlhood. Like some earth-crawling worm she had shed her poor and humble skin, and had emerged as though by a miracle into the radiant brilliancy of a beautiful butterfly. When she thought about it, it seemed to her that she was not the same person at all, that her very identity was gone, and that she had been transformed into somebody else.

As to Frederick Warne—he had faded into nothingness! Lord Bainton never spoke to her about him. With the worldly wisdom for which he was remarkable, the old man had merely observed to her as they drove away together from Aberdare House:

“Now, my dear child, you have left all that kind of thing”—indicating the school-house and inhabitants with a backward jerk of his thumb—“behind you for ever. You are to begin a new life altogether from this very day.”

And he never alluded in the most distant fashion to the unlucky classical master, or to her unfortunate position with regard to him.

So she had done what was simplest, and easiest, and pleasantest to herself about him—she had forgotten him.

Why—on this first day at her new English

home, at which it had been arranged that she was to spend six months of the year, and the remaining six under the care of her guardian—why the thought of Warne should have suddenly obtruded itself unbidden, like a vague omen of evil, into her soul, it was impossible to say!

When she came down the wide oak staircase into the hall where she had been received on her arrival, she saw standing at the bottom of it lolling irreverently back against one of the stately knights in armour, a person to whom she had not been introduced on the previous evening. She had shaken hands with the master of the house, a silent grey-haired man who had presided at the dinner-table without joining much in the conversation—and as in a dream she had answered the numerous questions of Lady Camilla Greyson and her cousin, Mrs. Torrington, whose face somehow reminded her of something or someone to whom she could not put a name—but this boy who stood at the bottom of the staircase had certainly not been at the dinner-table. Helen had been so tired with her long journey that she had thankfully retired to her room as soon as the meal had ended—and indeed all through it she was so worn out and sleepy that she had scarcely taken in all the details of her new surroundings—still she was quite sure she had not seen this particular inmate of the house before.

He was a tall, loosely-built lad of sixteen; he had curly hair, a wide mouth, a funny little snub nose, and a ruddy countenance freely sprinkled over with freckles, out of which twinkled two small and somewhat comically screwed-up greenish grey eyes. He was dressed in a rough tweed suit and wore breeches and gaiters. At his feet crouched a long-haired liver-coloured spaniel, looking up with enquiring and interested eyes at his master, who was curiously engaged in tying a pocket hand-

kerchief tightly around the small middle of a diminutive black and tan toy terrier. This animal, certainly the smallest of its breed that it was possible to imagine, was whining piteously and struggling vehemently as though in dread of impending torture. Helen stopped short half-way down the staircase in order to watch what was going to happen. When the youth had firmly knotted the handkerchief round the struggling little creature, he reached up to the iron-mailed warrior above him and proceeded to tie the two ends of it round the outstretched arm of the figure in armour in such a fashion that the unlucky toy terrier, howling and yelping with terror, dangled in mid air over his head. Then the boy laughed aloud.

"There, you little brute!—that will teach you to gnaw up my fishing lines! Wait till your fond missus comes down, my little dear, and see what *she* will say when she sees you swung up on high!"

"How horrid!" cried somebody behind him. He turned and saw Helen, with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes swooping down like an avenging angel upon his handiwork.

"Hallo!—shut up that! I say—what are you going to do?"

"I am going to untie this poor little beast," cried Helen indignantly, her fingers trembling so much that she had some difficulty in finding the knot of the handkerchief, to which she had to stretch up at arm's length above her head. "I don't know who you are,"—she went on breathlessly—"but of all the horrid, cruel, hateful boys I ever met, I think you are the worst."

"I am Ted Greyson," said the young gentleman—but he made no further effort to stop her autocratic proceedings and only stood watching her in a somewhat awestruck silence,

"Well then, Ted Greyson, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" said Helen furiously.

"Well, you are a pretty good cheeked one, Miss Dacre, to tell me that, the first time you've ever seen me! Besides, it just shows what a lot you girls know, to call me cruel—it doesn't hurt the little brute one bit—it only frightens him."

Helen had set the unlucky toy terrier free by this time, and was soothing its whimperings by sundry coaxings and caressings. "What do you frighten it for then?" she asked him, still hot with her righteous wrath. "What harm has it done you, poor little beast?"

"Only gnawed up my new fishing-tackle. But it's not that so much made me do it as to spite Dora Torrington—it's her dog, and she's such a beast! I—I—didn't mean to be cruel," added the boy a little falteringly.

Helen looked at him. It was not a bad face by any means, although it was an ugly one—there was, in fact, something honest and straightforward about it, and now that he looked rueful and regretful, she felt her dislike and horror of his deed of cruelty fast melting away.

"It is always cruel to torment dumb animals," she began a little formally, with a faint echo of some of old Miss Fairbrother's reproofs in her voice. And then she looked again into the queer, puckered-up face and smiled. "But if you are sorry you did it——"

"No, by Jove! I'm not sorry one bit!" cried this curious boy, with a sudden and surprising change of countenance. "I would do it again this minute just to see you look in a rage again as you did when I first saw you! By Jove! you did look a stunner. You don't look half so pretty now," he added, with uncompromising veracity.

Helen laughed outright. "If that is all, I dare say you will have the opportunity of making me in

a rage, as you call it, lots of times more—certainly if you torment animals——”

“I never do as a rule. I never will again. I only wanted to be revenged on Dora because she set the beast on to my fishing-tackle—shut him up in my room all night on purpose, I believe. She hates me so! But there I’ll let her dog alone, I really will—if you will only be friends and make it up. Won’t you shake hands?”

It is said that the best friendships are those that have been inaugurated by a quarrel.

Ted held out his hand timidly. It was a boy’s hand, red and rough, and disfigured by many a cut and scar. One of the fingers was bent, having been broken at football, and of another the nail was black and discoloured.

Helen could not help smiling as she resigned her own slim taper-fingered hand into the firm and hearty grip that closed upon it.

“Yes,” she said kindly, “I will be friends certainly.”

And thus was the bargain between them struck and sealed—never on either side to be repented of. Even on that first morning she was not sorry for her new ally. Breakfast at Oldpark was a desultory meal—people straggled down to it one by one and secluded themselves in a gloomy abstraction in their letters or the newspapers. In some houses—and country houses chiefly—it appears to be the rule that everybody shall be systematically in a bad temper and display the worst of manners during the first meal of the day.

It was Helen Dacre’s first experience of this singular social phenomenon.

It surprised and depressed her to be greeted with a brief “Mornin’” thrown at her with averted eyes by the master of the house ere he buried himself from view behind the morning papers propped up against the sugar-basin in front of him—whilst

Lady Camilla only extended a couple of cold fingers to her, and murmuring "Help yourself. I hope you slept well," fell upon her letters without seeming to expect any reply. Presently in strolled Mrs. Torrington, complaining of neuralgia and declaring herself incapable of eating—and lastly Lord Bainton—to whose habitual moroseness in the morning hours she was already accustomed—who settled himself in absolute silence opposite to her.

Everybody foraged for their own food after the fashion of wild animals; they prowled round the table with discontented faces, lifting up dish covers and carrying off odd scraps of toast and butter, which they conveyed away, each to his own corner.

Helen Dacre, who was young and healthy and blessed with a fine and vigorous appetite, felt that without Ted she would certainly have starved—but Ted too was young and hungry, and he brought her everything that she wanted, so that this bond of union between them cemented their new-formed alliance.

"Has anyone seen my beautiful Tiny?" enquired Dora Torrington presently, in the midst of a profound silence. Then she glanced at Ted, who grinned broadly, but answered nothing.

Helen told her that her dog was in its basket before the hall fire, a piece of information which she received with a subdued sigh. Helen could not help watching her furtively—she felt certain that she had seen her somewhere before. The pretty "mignonne" face with its pink and white colouring, the tiny red mouth, the soft fluffy hair that stood out like a crown from her small head—all brought back something—some unfinished impression out of the past. But where, and how, and when had she seen it, or its similitude, before? For the life of her she could not remember!

"I wish Helen to receive her first riding lesson to-day," remarked Lord Bainton, speaking as one does whose word is law. "I understand that her new horse arrived yesterday, and I wish her to begin as soon as possible. Is there any one who can teach her, Camilla?"

"I am sure I don't know. I daresay one of the men could go out with her. You must ask Tom."

"Tom," when his attention was called to the subject, looked exceedingly cross, but murmured, as though under pressure of circumstances he was powerless to resist, that the men were all very busy with the hunters just now, but that he would go round to the stables after breakfast and see what could be done.

"You needn't trouble, father," here spoke up the son of the house. "I am going to teach Miss Dacre to ride."

Mrs. Torrington looked up with a laugh. "Good gracious! since when?" she ejaculated across the table at him.

"Since when—*what!*" retorted Ted, glaring at her fiercely, with a very red face.

"Since when have you turned lady's man? I thought you hated women, Ted?"

"So I do—*some* women," replied the boy markedly.

Lady Camilla looked up quickly.

"Thank you Ted, if you will go out for a little while with our guest to-day, as your uncle wishes her to begin at once, you will be making yourself very useful—soon," with a swift glance at Dora, "I shall be able to confide her, I hope, to a more efficient instructor."

"I am really sorry to give so much trouble," said poor Helen, blushing. "I can easily wait, if Lord Bainton does not mind."

"Oh, it's no trouble, my dear. Mr. Nugent, who is coming here, will I am sure be delighted to

teach you. He is a splendid horseman, and on non-hunting days will enjoy taking you out."

"Who is Mr. Nugent?"

But nobody answered her question.

Then Helen became suddenly conscious of something—some undercurrent of comprehension amongst them all, which she could not understand, and from which she was shut out.

Mr. Greyson at the foot of the table chuckled to himself, and said it was "as good as a play." Lord Bainton frowned, and remarked that Nugent was a lucky beggar to be given such a chance, while Dora Torrington, with a little sneer, said to him, in an audible whisper, that really dear Camilla was quite over-reaching herself on this occasion. Even Ted looked steadily down into his plate and seemed confused.

Helen looked bewilderingly from one to the other. What was it all about? Why had that name acted like a subtle electricity amongst all these people, amongst whom her life was cast?

"Ted," she said to him afterwards in the hall, when breakfast was over, "what did they all mean? Why did Mrs. Torrington——?"

"Never you mind what Dora says. She is a *cat*! a demon-cat!" answered Teddie, with angry and spiteful emphasis. "Don't listen to her."

"But—*who* is Mr. Nugent, and why is he to teach me to ride?"

"He is *not* going to teach you to ride. I am," replied Ted, with dignity.

"Well, but who is he?" persisted Helen.

"He—he is a brick," answered her young partisan warmly. "You'll like him. He's a brick. But I am going to teach you to ride."

And more than that she could not extract from him.

CHAPTER VI.

LEARNING TO RIDE.

“There’s something in a flying horse.”

—WORDSWORTH.

To her dying day Helen never forgot the condition of abject terror in which, ready equipped in a faultlessly-fitting habit, she stood at the open front door and watched the rapid—far too rapid—approach of the animal which her guardian had bought for her in London.

Helen had never been on a horse’s back in her life—a fact which, although it had not been a subject of regret to anybody before—now seemed to fill the minds of everybody about her with a dismay amounting almost to consternation. That she should not know how to ride was a calamity which Lord Bainton had never ceased to deplore since he had taken her away from Aberdare House on that memorable September afternoon, now nearly four months ago. Their foreign travels, which Helen would have gladly prolonged, were cut short for no other reason than that she might be brought home to be instructed in this great and apparently indispensable accomplishment.

“You must certainly manage to see a little hunting before the season is over,” Lord Bainton had said to her.

“Hunting! don’t speak of it!” cried Helen, laughing. “I should tumble off.”

“Pray do not allude to such a thing,” replied the old man with grave disapproval. “You will have to learn how to stick on. Dear, dear! a fine girl

like you not to know how to sit upon a horse ! it's inconceivable ! ”

“ I don't see how or where I could have learnt in my position at Miss Fairbrother's.”

“ Well, we must put all that to rights as soon as possible. Your father was a good horseman—it is probably in your blood, it ought to come to you by nature.”

But Helen did not feel in the least as if nature meant to be of the slightest use to her as she stood—if the truth must be owned—trembling in every limb, upon the steps of the front door.

The whole party had assembled to see her mount, and when Ted, on a big bay of his father's came round the shrubbery from the stables, followed by a groom leading a very handsome chesnut, she felt as if she would dearly love to run back into the house and lock herself up into her bedroom for the remainder of the day.

For the first few moments she enjoyed with gratitude a short reprieve, for everybody gathered about the chesnut, admiring and discussing his points and reputed virtues. Lord Bainton had commissioned a friend who was a good judge of horse-flesh to purchase for his ward the best and safest lady's hunter that money could buy and England could produce. And the friend had faithfully fulfilled his orders.

Sunflower apparently realized everything that the fondest fancy could require of him ; he had carried a lady regularly to hounds, was said to possess perfect manners, delightful paces, and to be absolutely free from vice. As in an evil dream Helen heard them all talking him over ; they felt his legs all round, they pronounced his shoulders to be excellent and his quarters beyond compare, his height, shape, and make, came also under discussion ; and all the time her heart was failing and quaking within her.

"You like him yourself, do you not?" said Lord Bainton, turning to her at last. "What do you think of him?"

"He is a very pretty colour," was all that poor Helen could find to say between her chattering teeth.

"More than you are, my dear Miss Dacre!" cried Mrs. Torrington, laughing. "Why, you're as white as a sheet! What do you think will happen to you? Oh, I only wish I had a lovely hunter of my own! But some people don't value their good luck!"

Mr. Greyson, who, where a horse was concerned, was wont to brighten up in his manner, came forward to put her up. She stood as she was told, close to the side of the horse, reached up her hand to the pommel and held out her foot. Then came a wild struggle, a helpless plunge—a jump that came just a whole minute too late—and poor Helen slipped ignominiously down again on to the ground.

Mr. Greyson uttered an exclamation of impatience—everybody laughed—Mrs. Torrington loudest of all. Helen's white cheeks had turned crimson with shame and mortification; tears gathered thickly in her eyes.

"I shall *never* get up on his back, he is so very, very, tall," she stammered hopelessly. But here Ted came to the rescue.

"Let me put her up, father, I'm stronger than you are," and shouldering his parent out of the way the boy came to her side.

"Oh, yes you will, it's very easy, really," he said reassuringly. "You can't expect to do things the first time you try; here, give me your foot, and spring when I tell you. "Don't" he added in a whisper—"don't give that beast Dora another chance of laughing at you."

Whether it was that whisper which aroused her

pride and put her on her mettle, or whether Ted was really a better hand at the business than his father, or whether she understood what was expected of her better the second time of trying than she did the first, Helen certainly managed to achieve the feat, which seemed so impossible, with perfect ease, and vaulted lightly into her place in the saddle.

A little sense of victory came to her at once. Ted was delighted. Lord Bainton, who had looked annoyed at her first failure, clapped his hands and cried :

"Bravo, bravo!" whilst Mrs. Torrington left off laughing at her.

Somehow, directly she was seated in the saddle, Helen found her courage. After a few simple directions as to her seat and her reins, they started off at a walk down the drive, Ted riding close by her side, and watching her carefully.

"You are perfectly safe, you know," said Ted confidently. "I'll take care of you. You can't possibly come to grief."

Whether this was true or no, Helen, at all events, believed it; her truth and faith in her young cavalier were implicit, and she obeyed his instructions humbly and scrupulously.

When they were outside the park, Ted told her that she was to hold on tight and follow him, and immediately he put his horse into a gentle canter along the wide grass margin of the road; with a little shake of his head the chesnut darted forward after him.

"Come on, don't be in a funk," were the only directions Ted gave to her; she obeyed him as to the first order, and after the first few moments of wild confusion began, somewhat to her own surprise, to obey him as to the second as well.

Perhaps, as Lord Bainton had told her, the art of it was in her blood, and had laid dormant within

her all these years awaiting only the opportunity to awake into life. For it is certain that good horsemanship is an inherited thing, and that it runs in some families in a remarkable degree, whilst in others, do what they will, it seems to be entirely left out.

"Oh, it's l—lovely!" stammered Helen breathlessly, when they pulled up after about half-a-mile's spin along the smooth green turf. "I—had no idea—it would be so nice."

"You like it?" cried Ted triumphantly. "I knew you would. You get on capitally and sit as square as a rock—you'll do—I'll teach you in no time; hold your hands a little lower and catch up your curb a bit when you let him go—so—now give him his head!" And off they started anew.

And so it was Ted, and not the unknown Mr. Nugent, who had the pride and glory of teaching Helen Dacre to ride. The lessons were repeated daily, and she progressed rapidly. To be sure she was perfectly mounted, and no unlucky accidents occurred to scare away her new-born courage; and Ted was very careful of her, and very proud of her too, for she certainly was a most intelligent pupil. Her seat and her hands were naturally good, and once confidence came to her there seemed little left to teach her. On the fourth day she was jumping over hurdles in the field, much to her own and her young teacher's delight. Their friendship made rapid strides during these daily lessons, and Helen often caught herself wondering sadly what she would do when the holidays came to an end and Ted went back to school.

One afternoon they went out as usual for their ride. It had been arranged that Helen, specially attended by a groom told off to look after her, should make her first appearance in the hunting-field the next day. The meet was within three

miles of Oldpark, and all the riding portion of the establishment were to be there. Ted had given up his hunting for nearly a whole week in order to pursue his course of instruction, and had seen his father and uncle ride off together daily without a pang of envy; but now he gave it as his opinion that Helen could ride to hounds as well as the best of them, and so the morrow was chosen for her *début* in Meadowshire.

At lunch Ted and Helen had so much to say to each other about the line of country they were going across that afternoon, for they had by this time quite forsaken the roads, that they had no time to listen to the conversation of their elders. Yet, as in a dream, which came back later to her recollection, Helen did hear that the dog-cart was to go to the station to meet the 5.15 train, and that Mr. Gilbert Nugent was certainly expected to arrive by it.

She did not care at all about Mr. Gilbert Nugent now, he did not interest her in the least, he was to bear no part in her equestrian education. Ted had taught her everything she ought to know, and she could learn the rest by herself. She was not only young, but, for her years, was preternaturally ignorant of the world and of things which young women often pick up instinctively—if she had not been, she might have remarked the curious sense of expectation which awaited this fresh addition to the party. Lady Camilla's suppressed excitement, and Dora Torrington's scarcely concealed agitation, would not have escaped an older or a wiser woman; but Helen saw nothing beyond Ted's ugly friendly face, and had no thoughts that did not centre themselves upon Sunflower's performances over the hedges and ditches, and her own nerve and dexterity in getting him across them.

So they started full of hope, and full of young animal spirits, and meanwhile, the dog-cart went

only to the station, and the short winter afternoon wore itself away.

The road from the station ran for about a mile and a quarter along the side of the railway. The steady old mare between the shafts of the high dog-cart had gone backwards and forwards to meet the trains so often during the course of her life, that she was pretty well hardened to the rush and the roar of the locomotives along the line. Yet even she made a dart forwards for about fifty yards, as the London express, snorting red fire and steam, thundered up behind her out of the darkness of a particularly dark evening.

"Steady, old lady, steady," said Nugent, drawing her in with a firm hand, as the express rushed away ahead into the depths of the night, and with a wild farewell shriek, plunged into the tunnel and was seen no more. Almost immediately afterwards, the groom by his side, turning sharply round, exclaimed :

"There's a runaway horse, sir, coming up behind," and the words were scarcely out of his lips before a horse and rider tore wildly past the dog-cart. The light of the lamps flashed for one moment upon the maddened animal, upon his shining flanks lashed into foam, and upon the flying blackness of a woman's skirt.

"By Heavens, it's a lady," cried Nugent, striking the mare with his whip, and the dog-cart dashed forward in pursuit.

"There's a nasty place ahead, sir," suggested the groom; "that there steep bank into the canal."

Gilbert Nugent knew every inch of the road, he did not need to be reminded of it. A faint cry for help came back to him out of the darkness.

He stood up and shouted with all his might :

"Pull his head round into the hedge with a sharp jerk, if you possibly can."

The lady with more presence of mind and more vigour of arm than ladies under such circumstances are wont to display, instantly obeyed his directions. He could see by the dark outline of horse and rider before him against the lighter colour of the road, that she gave two or three successive tugs to her horse's head, and with such good success that the animal suddenly swerved round ; there was a soft grassy ditch and a very high, straggling hedge, and into the ditch and the hedge the horse and the rider went with a wild crash, and fell together in a confused heap upon the grass.

Nugent uttered an exclamation between his teeth ; but, risky as it was, he remembered the steep defenceless chalk bank into the canal a hundred yards ahead, and felt that his advice had been good.

In another minute he was out of the cart assisting the lady to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" He could not see her face, but he could feel that she was trembling very much.

"No, I think not, only bruised. I—I think my arm is twisted. Please see after my horse."

Sunflower had managed to struggle to his feet and stood quietly by, apparently untroubled by shame or remorse at his past conduct.

"It's the young lady as is staying at Oldpark, sir," said the groom, recognising the chesnut even before his rider.

"You had better ride that horse home, and I will drive the lady back," said Nugent.

He helped her up into the cart ; her hat was battered, and her habit covered with mud ; he could see she was dreadfully shaken and upset. She looked faint, and he had no flask with him that he could get at.

Even after he had got her up on to the cart, a work of some difficulty, she lay back for a few

moments with closed eyes, quite incapable of speech.

After they had driven on a little way, she roused herself to say a few words.

"I ought to thank you. Please forgive my ingratitude."

"Pray do not attempt to speak. I fear you are feeling very much upset. I wish I could have spared you that tumble. But look to the right"—pointing downwards with his whip—"I was afraid your horse might bolt down this nasty place."

The road here took a sharp curve and by the dim light of the lamps Helen saw beneath her the shining white of a steep chalk bank with the dark sluggish waters of the canal winding round the base of the declivity. She shuddered at the suggestive sight. A runaway horse might indeed have easily gone over that undefended and treacherous incline. It would have meant a horrible and almost a certain death!

"You have certainly saved my life," she said after a moment of silence.

"Oh no. I only told you what to do. But you are shivering. You must let me wrap you up."

He wound his own travelling rug round her shoulders, tucking it carefully and almost tenderly about her, and in this fashion they arrived in due time at Oldpark.

CHAPTER VII

THE OLD LOVE.

"When love begins to sicken and decay
It useth an enforced ceremony,
There are no tricks in plain and simple faith,"
—SHAKESPEARE.

GILBERT NUGENT had not troubled himself in the very least as to who was the unknown young woman he had picked up out of the ditch and driven home by his side through the dark and winding lanes. It did not matter to him who she was. The groom had stated that the lady was staying at Oldpark, and from the imperfect evidence of his senses he had perceived that she was young, with a slim and girlish figure.

Young ladies—nieces and *protégées* of Lady Camilla's—frequently stayed at Oldpark, but they had never interested him in any way. As Dora Torrington had said of him, he disliked girls. He thought them mostly insipid and foolish, and her ladyship had so often endeavoured to set little traps for him with regard to them in order to detach him from Dora, that he had come to regard all her young lady visitors with a certain amount of suspicion. Who this young lady might be, he neither knew nor cared—if he had known he would have perhaps felt sorry that he had averted her from a watery grave, or that he had not left her in a fainting condition in the wet ditch into which she had fallen headlong. The name of Dacre was not one that he was naturally disposed to love, although with a certain philosophy that was in his character he often told himself that if the girl had

defrauded him of a fortune, she had at any rate done him one good turn to make up for it—for she had rendered it impossible for him to marry Mrs. Torrington!

As they neared the house he became suddenly ludicrously awake to the fact that that lady would have an access of very bad temper were she to witness his arrival with a young woman by his side. There would have to be explanations of all kinds, and Dora would laugh her little bitter mocking laugh, and look as if she did not believe a word of the story. He knew her of old!

"I think," he said to his companion, "that if you don't mind I will drive straight into the stable yard."

"Oh yes, certainly—that will be much the best," answered the hitherto silent figure by his side. "Then I can run into the house by the back door."

Helen too had felt the embarrassment of her return to the house—in a muddy and battered condition and under the escort, not of her friend Ted, whom she had lost in the darkness when her horse bolted at the train, but of a strange gentleman, to whom she had not formally been introduced, although of course she had long ago concluded him to be the expected Mr. Nugent, about whom there appeared to hang such an atmosphere of mystery.

When he helped her down out of the dog cart he saw her face plainly for the first time, and a very fine pair of grey eyes looked seriously and gravely up into his.

"I should be very much obliged to you if you would kindly not say anything about my little accident," she said to him. "The fact is, I want to go out hunting to-morrow."

"I quite understand," he answered, with a smile. "Lady Camilla might not allow you to go! I will be sure to be discreet."

She had unwound his rug from her shoulders, and giving it back to him with a little bow, she slipped quickly away across the yard towards the back premises of the house.

"I call that a sensible girl," thought Nugent to himself, as he strolled round to the front door. "Doesn't make a fuss about things, and she is plucky too—wants to hunt to-morrow!"

And then he went in and forgot all about her.

It so happened that Helen's secret was kept. She ran up against Ted on the back stairs. He had encountered the groom who had ridden Sunflower home, and had heard all that had happened to her from him, and was overjoyed to find her unhurt and still bent upon the day's hunting on the morrow.

"But I tell you what, we mustn't let my uncle hear a word about Sunflower's having bolted, or he won't allow you to ride him to hounds."

"That is exactly what I thought, Ted. And it was only the train frightened him. Don't let us tell anyone."

"How about Nugent?"

"I've asked him to say nothing."

"I say," looking at her oddly as he leant back against the wall of the narrow passage, "did you make friends with him, Nell?"

"With Mr. Nugent? Oh, I hardly said a word to him. I was so frightened at first, and I felt so faint, I couldn't have talked."

"Did you tell him your name?"

"No. Why on earth should I? Let me go by, dear boy. I am so muddy, and so tired; I must go to my room and rest, or I shall not be fit to come down to dinner."

"Well, you are a jolly good sort to be still keen on hunting to-morrow," said Ted approvingly as he allowed her to pass him. "I must say, that *for a girl*, you aren't half a bad chap!"

Mrs. Torrington looked very charming that evening as she stood ready dressed for dinner before the fire-place in the old oak-panelled hall. She had arrayed herself in a particularly becoming and somewhat juvenile costume of soft white *crêpe de chine*, and so admirably did the delicate fabric harmonise with the clear tints of her still wonderful complexion, with the child-like blue eyes and the fair aureole of softly coiled hair about her small head, that nobody seeing her thus for the first time, would have guessed her to be within ten years of her real age. There are some women who at thirty are already faded and old, who have sunk back into the pale ranks of those whose power is over and whose charm is buried for ever in the past; there are others again who seem to possess the wonderful gift of keeping the hand of Time at bay for an indefinite term of years, whose voice and whose footstep still preserve the ring of youth, and whose faces retain the faculty of attraction and of conquest long after the reality of their first beauty has passed away. Such women have always maintained their ascendancy over men's lives.

Dora Torrington had thus learnt how to defy the passing years. She had suffered a good deal from them, but she had not allowed them to rob her of her perennial youthfulness.

"When I grow old and wrinkled, I hope I shall die," she often said to herself, and to keep off those terrible and inevitable wrinkles was the chief study of her existence.

To-night she had striven—Heaven knows with what elaborate care—to make herself supremely fair, and certainly her efforts had been successful.

Even Gilbert Nugent, when he joined her in the hall, was conscious of the loveliness which, had he known it, was put forth all for himself.

"How remarkably well you are looking, Dora,"

he said to her as he came and stood beside her in the fire-glow. "Oldpark suits you."

"Do you think so?" she replied, smiling sweetly at him. "Are you glad to see me, Gilbert?"

"Of course. We have not met for some time. What have been doing with yourself this winter? Country house visits, I suppose? Any new flirtations?"

"How unkind you are! do I ever forget *you*, Gilbert?"

He made no response, only he looked down and the ghost of a sigh escaped his lips. How he wished indeed that she would forget him!

His silence and his coldness exasperated her. She knew that he was tired of her—dead sick of her—and that if she would but give him his liberty, he would be thankful to her, and yet she was aware that his honour, and a certain steadfastness of affection, prevented him from transferring his allegiance elsewhere, and so she would not loosen the chain or set free the wearied captive.

"What can he want better?" she said to herself; "it's not as if I was old or ugly. I am still as attractive as ever to other men, in all these years I have not aged a bit; he has no excuse; if he were half a man he would marry me, poor as we both are, but he is too selfish to marry into poverty, he is incapable of generosity. Very well! and so am I. I will not set him free till the ten years of our bargain are over!"

Then, because she was as clever as she was pretty, she played her trump card.

Nestling up close to him and twisting her soft, bare arm through his, she whispered with laughing eyes.

"Camilla has got another wife in readiness for you; she has laid a delightful little trap for you this time!"

Nothing irritated Nugent more than this match-

making propensity of his hostess. Old friends as the Greysons were, he often told himself that he would come to their house no more if this system of persecution was to continue.

He laughed a little angrily.

"I should have thought she was tired of that game!"

"Not a bit. She has invited you on purpose. She is quite sure you will succumb this time!"

"She told me she asked me to come because you were here, in order to meet you. Naturally I accepted the invitation with alacrity and promptitude!"

There was a little mocking sarcasm in his reply which Dora did not forget to make a note of.

"Oh, that was a blind! the girl Camilla destines you for is already in the house. No doubt she is well primed. Why, she even confided the scheme to *me*! She thinks I ought to persuade you, for your own good, to marry her,"

"For my own good! Why should marriage be for anyone's advantage? Every marriage I ever heard of is more or less unhappy! Why can't you women let a man alone instead of always shoving matrimony down his throat as if it were a panacea for all human ills? I am not going to marry any one to order—not anyone!"

He said it with a sort of fierce anger—he might, or he might not, have meant to imply more than he said. Mrs. Torrington laughed, a little mirthless laugh he had often heard before.

"Of course not. Why should you? Besides, for three years longer, you are bound to remain a bachelor, so isn't it a good thing that you *never* do feel inclined to rush into the bonds of matrimony?"

He looked savage, but made no answer. She had a way of turning the tables upon him which irritated him.

"This girl——" began Dora again, after a short pause.

"Oh, you needn't tell me about her," he said, turning away impatiently. Of course, it was the girl on the runaway horse whom he had driven home in the dog-cart! Seen in the light of his own prejudices, the whole of this episode now appeared to him to be a preconcerted plan—it had all probably been got up on purpose—a sensational introduction to arouse his interest or his compassion! The flagrant injustice of this improbable hypothesis did not even strike him. "I take no interest whatever in these girls and their plots," he said angrily.

"Camilla thinks you will in this one."

"Why this particular one?"

"Because she has money."

"Money! What a nice opinion Lady Camilla must have of me. I'm a vulgar fortune-hunter now, I suppose?"

"This girl's fortune has something peculiar about it."

"How do you mean?"

"Only that it ought to be yours," she said lightly, turning away.

"Mine? Good Heavens! Who on earth?—Ah! I begin to see; come here, Dora, come back, tell me at once—is it that wretched girl——"

He followed her half across the hall; under the light of a tall standard lamp he caught her by the hand and drew her close to him; he looked flushed, eager, excited. Dora's face, turned up towards him, was beaming with a smile—the smile of triumph and of victory. The lamp-light fell upon them both.

Someone, in the shadow of the landing above, stood still for a moment at the top of the stairs to look at them. In her black evening dress no ray of light from below illumined her motionless figure. She could not hear what they said, but their faces

were clear to her; the hands that were clasped together, the eyes that were occupied with each other, the handsome man bending over the delicately pretty woman, it all came back to her at once with a flash of recollection.

"I know now where I have seen her, and him," said Helen to herself. "They are the same two who were on the coach that came across Cleare's Common. I envied them then, they looked so happy, so oblivious of everything but each other. I envy them now—they look at one another now—they are happy, no doubt, to be together—they are lovers!"

It seemed to come home to her like a revelation, and she stole softly downwards with noiseless foot-fall upon the velvet pile carpet.

What a handsome couple they made; how happy they must be—Oh, how good it must be to love, and be loved—by such a man as that!

Then suddenly she heard his voice—a voice that trembled indeed with emotion—and yet the emotion was scarcely that of love.

"Do you mean, then, to tell me that wretched girl has been brought here—to mock me—to triumph over me!"

"Not at all. To marry you!" was the laughing answer. "That is the plan—to marry you to her, so that you may get your uncle's money back through her."

"My God! but it is an insult; why, if there were not another woman in the world, I would not marry Helen Dacre!"

A swift upward rush, the retreating rustle of a silken skirt, and the staircase was empty once more—the listener was gone!

CHAPTER VIII

ACROSS COUNTRY.

"Come not within the measure of my wrath."

—SHAKESPEARE.

THE hounds met the next morning at Welton Gorse, a small common with a public house at the corner of it, situated about three miles from Oldpark.

By eleven o'clock a good muster of horsemen had assembled at the appointed place, in the open space in front of the "Green Man," whilst from the stable-yard behind it, glimpses could be obtained of the pack of hounds, carefully suppressed into silence and order by the two whips.

Not many ladies were present, for the day was damp and misty, and with a falling glass only the very few who regarded hunting as a business and not as a trifling pastime, had ventured to put in an appearance.

It was therefore not very difficult for Gilbert Nugent to recognise the heroine of his last night's adventure, even if her proximity to Ted had not revealed her identity to him.

For he had not seen Miss Dacre at dinner last night. For some reason or other, which was not communicated to him, she remained in her own room. He was left to imagine that her tumble had tried her more than he had at first supposed, and his angry attitude towards her had undergone a certain amount of modification in consequence.

"Poor girl!" he thought, with an almost involuntary qualm of compassion, as he saw the butler push away her vacant chair from the dinner-table, "perhaps, after all she was hurt."

Her absence served also to arouse a little

curiosity in his mind about her. He gathered, from a word or two he overheard between Lady Camilla and her brother, that she had excused herself from appearing on the grounds of a headache, caused by over fatigue from her ride.

"I don't think her very strong," he heard Lord Bainton say. "I believe I ought not to allow her to hunt to-morrow."

"Oh, let her go to the meet anyhow, Uncle," put in Ted eagerly; "besides, she'll be all right to-morrow."

"Nothing unusual happened, I suppose, this afternoon?" enquired Lord Bainton of his young nephew; "the horse went all right?"

"Oh, yes, all right," replied Ted, with unblushing mendacity. And Mr. Nugent, who might have supplied the required information, discreetly held his tongue.

The next morning—dressing on a hunting day being a lengthy and arduous undertaking not to be lightly hurried over—Nugent came down, unfortunately late for breakfast, to find that Ted and his pupil had already started. Dora, too, had finished her breakfast and was impatient to be off, and Mr. Greyson, who mounted her occasionally on one of his worst horses, was already in the saddle and offering her his escort.

"I'll wait for Gilbert, thanks," she answered; "he has just finished his breakfast," upon which her cousin and Lord Bainton rode off together.

"What is the meaning of that business, Tom?" enquired Bainton of his brother-in-law. "Is the pretty widow engaged to Nugent?"

"I suppose so—though they declare there's nothing in it; but I'm not up to the modern ways of young men and young women of the present day."

"I don't see how they are to marry if they have no money.'

"Neither do I. That is why Camilla hoped he might take a fancy to your ward, Bainton."

"Oh, as to that," replied the other, with some offence, "I do not consider that he would be by a long way a good enough match for her—and my consent, until she is twenty-one, is necessary."

"And you would not give it in this case?" enquired Mr. Greyson, with a little anxiety—for he too had been infected with his wife's fears lest Bainton should spoil Ted's chances by marrying his ward.

"I should be guided by circumstances," replied Lord Bainton a little stiffly, after a moment's pause. "Helen's own wishes and her happiness will be naturally my first consideration."

"Well," remarked Mr. Greyson meditatively, "a woman might do worse than trust her happiness to Gilbert Nugent; he is a good fellow."

"If by a 'good fellow' you mean a good sportsman, an undeniable shot, a first-rate billiard player, and a pleasant companion, I quite agree with you; but regarded as a suitor for my ward there are two very serious objections to him—his not unnatural desire to regain Ashworth's money, which would probably influence his motives to a considerable extent—and his undesirable and, to my old-fashioned ideas, incomprehensible friendship with your cousin, Mrs. Torrington."

"There is no harm in Dora Torrington," said his brother-in-law, with a quick flush; "the whole thing is silly, I grant you—but it means nothing —"

"Possibly not, but the world has said—and who is to say that the world is not right?—that, considering the publicity which has been given to the friendship, if Nugent marries, it is your cousin who ought to be his wife."

Mr. Greyson rode on in silence by his side.

"So much for Camilla's match-making!" he

thought ruefully. "It is clear that unless the girl herself falls in love with Nugent, nothing can be done."

Helen, sitting very straight upon her handsome chesnut horse opposite the "Green Man," was very far from falling in love with anybody. It was Lord Bainton himself who formally performed the introduction.

"I want to introduce you to Miss Dacre," he said to Nugent, when the latter rode up at length to the scene of action.

"Delighted, I am sure," replied the young man, with, however, very little delight in his voice or face.

Helen was on the further side of the little cluster of horsemen. As Nugent approached her in the wake of her guardian he had the opportunity of observing her carefully before she was aware of his presence. Instantly a picture rushed back to his memory—a picture of a wide Common, brilliant with yellow gorse and gold-brown bracken, and flooded with the rays of the dying sun, and in the foreground the tall, solitary figure of a woman standing alone by the roadside. Seen again, with another Common—a grey, flat, dismal-hued plain, this one—behind her, he knew her again at once. That picture, transient and insignificant as it had seemed, had left a curiously vivid impression upon his mind. There had been a sort of premonition within him ever since that day, that he was destined to see that woman again—that she was to bear some part either for good or evil in his future life—and now he found himself once more face to face with that floating vision of the past—and oh, marvel of marvels! the woman was Helen Dacre!

A warm flush swept over her pale, oval face, as she returned his bow.

"This is your first day's hunting, I believe?" he enquired politely.

She assented almost mutely, without meeting his eyes. A wild rage was in her heart towards this man, whose terrible words about herself she had overheard last night, and a desperate resolve had arisen in her mind.

Lord Bainton had ridden farther away: Nugent seized the opportunity to say to her in a lower tone:

"I trust you are none the worse for your fright and your tumble yesterday. I felt quite anxious about you when you did not come down last night. Are you better?"

She turned her eyes fully upon him—what fine eyes they were—large and deep and grey—he was sure they could be very tender eyes—but there was no tenderness in them now—on the contrary they were filled with such a hard and angry resentment as they met his, as to cause him a most curiously unpleasant surprise.

"Mr. Nugent," she said to him in a low steady voice, making no pretence at an answer to his polite questions concerning her health—"I think we had better understand one another at once."

"Miss Dacre!" he stammered.

"Yes—Dacre is my name—I am without doubt the 'wretched girl' who has robbed you of your uncle's money! This being the case, it will be better that we should remain total strangers to each other—as far, that is, as the exigencies of our position will permit of it."

"Upon my soul Miss Dacre—you are horribly unjust to me!" cried Nugent in uncontrollable agitation—for it is one thing to denounce an unknown young lady behind her back, and quite another to proclaim oneself the enemy of a lady whose flashing and beautiful eyes are looking into one's own. "You are most unjust!" he repeated hotly, "and I do not understand you in the least."

"On the contrary it is justice that is my aim and

object," she replied calmly, "and I will proceed to make my meaning perfectly clear to you. It is within your power to leave Oldpark—but as it is not within mine, it will be necessary that we shall exchange the ordinary civilities of daily life as long as we are both inmates of Mr. Greyson's house—more than this I forbid."

"You forbid!"

"I forbid you to speak to me one single word more than is required of necessity by the presence of other people."

"But why?—why?" he repeated blankly.

"Because I overheard what you said about me last night to Mrs. Torrington."

"Oh!" he could not utter another sound—he fell back from her side speechless. There was no apology on the face of the earth that could make his peace with her—no single word in the English language that could avail him anything. The absolute hopelessness of any such attempt paralyzed him.

His face as he drew away his horse from her side was ashen grey. Nothing in the whole course of his life had ever struck him such a blow. The utter debasement he experienced—the agony of intolerable shame which turned his whole being sick and cold, was an utterly new thing to him. Was it possible that it was to him—to the handsome and popular Gilbert Nugent who had ever had but to smile in order to succeed, whose only complaint had been that women, from Dora downwards, pursued him too persistently and too flatteringly—that it was to *him* that those cruel and scathing words had been spoken? For a few moments he felt as though he lay under some horrible enchantment, the gay scene about him became vague and indistinct before his eyes, and when some acquaintance spoke to him he stared blankly in his face and gave back no answer.

The business of the day aroused him at this moment from his stupefaction. The Master gave the signal, the mottled pack of hounds came out of the stable-yard of the inn and trotted up the muddy road escorted by the huntsman and the whips, and the whole field proceeded to file along after them in the direction of the gorse covert which was to be drawn. Nugent followed with the rest. On ahead between her guardian and Ted Greyson he could see Helen Dacre's slim back and the shiny brown hair coiled round her little upright head, could watch the easy movements of her graceful figure and the smooth outline of her oval cheek as she turned to speak first to one and then to the other of her companions. Somehow he could not help looking at her; the sight of her filled him with a blind exasperation, with a maddening anger, and yet it was impossible for him to turn either his eyes or his thoughts away from her.

All the time the hounds were drawing the covert, although he had moved as far away from her as possible, and although his own devoted Dora was once more at his side, he was still painfully and acutely conscious of the presence of the girl who had forbidden him to speak to her.

How handsome she had looked—how fine was the fire in her angry eyes, and the curl of her scornful lip!—how those sweet eyes and lips would look under other circumstances—to a man, for instance, whom she loved!

And then his eyes, glancing aside, fell upon Dora's little upturned face in close proximity to his own. Somehow a process of unwilling comparison went on swiftly and almost involuntarily in his mind. Now Mrs. Torrington did not look her best upon a horse. The stiff lines of a habit did not suit her babyish style of beauty—her hair fluttered incongruously beneath her tall black hat,

and her tie and collar were not quite everything that the taste of a fastidious sportsman demands. Moreover, the chill damp wind had taken the crispness out of the tiny curled rolls at the nape of her neck, so that they fell limply and untidily over her collar—whilst that same ungenial breeze had imparted a tinge of redness to her flower-tilted nose. Dora looked ever so much nearer her real age this morning than she had done last night in all the panoply of her evening-dress glory.

"What are you looking so solemn about, Gilbert?" she asked him, tapping his arm playfully with her hunting-crop. "You haven't spoken a single word to me since we got here. What is the matter?"

"It's beastly cold," he answered crossly, not answering her look and smile. "How many minutes more have we got to stand shivering here? There never are any foxes in this vile country."

"Listen!" she answered, as a faint whimper arose from the covert before them. "They have found already. We shall be off in a moment. Mind you keep near me, Gilbert, and pilot me over my fences."

"My dear girl," he answered roughly, "if ladies choose to come out hunting they must just take their chance like other people. I really cannot promise to give up my day's sport to look after you. You'd far better go back if you are nervous."

Before she could make any reply to this ungracious speech, a shout arose.

"Gone away—gone away!" came wildly from a dozen throats. From the further side of the covert everybody proceeded to rush headlong down the green slope, beyond which a small reddish object was to be seen flying madly away across the open, with the whole pack in full cry after it.

Helen by a piece of good luck found herself well to the front of the field.

"Sit tight and keep his head straight," had been Ted's parting instructions, as he shot on ahead of her, whilst Lord Bainton adjured her to be careful and to follow him through the gates and gaps which at his advanced age he now most frequently affected. But small heed has twenty for the prudent counsels of sixty, and Helen, with a good horse beneath her, and all the ardour and keenness of her youth and courage dancing in her veins, was not to be held back from tasting to the uttermost the delights of her first day with the hounds. She shook her head gaily at her guardian, and followed Ted boldly and fearlessly.

On swept the rush of horses across the broad green meadows. Helen, who was well to the front, would certainly have seen all the fun and been in at the death at the end of the short and sharp twenty minutes' run, but for an incident which altered the whole complexion of the day for her.

Two men—strangers to her—were riding alongside, and one called out to the other :

"A man down at the last fence, isn't there?"

"Yes—his horse staked himself, I think," was the reply.

"Is the man hurt?"

"I haven't a notion. He didn't get up."

"Is anybody looking after him?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I wasn't going to lose a good thing for a chap I don't know," and the two riders shot on in front of her.

There was something to Helen's mind that was very brutal in the utter selfishness of this short conversation. She looked round—half-a-dozen scattered riders were galloping across the field behind her, and she could just see the head and forequarters of a horse struggling half out of the

ditch she had just crossed, but no rider was to be seen.

The hunt and all its untasted joys went straight out of Helen Dacre's head. With a gush of pity for the unfortunate man whom everybody had forgotten and left behind, she pulled in her excited animal and cantered back to the fence behind her.

The horse—badly hurt apparently—lay half submerged in the wet ditch, and on the ground in front, a man, white and motionless as death itself, lay flat upon his back ; his eyes were closed, and a thin stream of blood trickled ominously across his forehead.

She cast one wild look around her. There was not a living being in sight.

The man was Gilbert Nugent.

CHAPTER IX.

IN COMMON HUMANITY.

“ His face was fixed—his face was white.
Great God ! the man was dead ! ”

—WHYTE MELVILLE.

To find oneself alone in a sylvan landscape with a man who is to all appearances perfectly dead, and yet whom common humanity compels one to succour, is not an enviable position for the most stout-hearted ; but when this unfortunate predicament occurs to a young and inexperienced girl, and the man stretched out helplessly before her happens to be the one person on earth to whom she has sworn an eternal enmity, there is an aggravation of the circumstances of the case which may be said to be absolutely appalling.

Helen Dacre, left alone with the seemingly lifeless corpse of Gilbert Nugent, was for the first few moments completely at her wits' end. She had sprung hastily from her horse, and tying him up to

a neighbouring gate, did her utmost for some minutes to restore animation to the injured man. Kneeling down by his side on the wet and muddy field, she lifted his head upon her arm and, having discovered his flask in the side pocket of his coat, she tried to force the neck of it between his lips. This, however, was a hopeless endeavour, for his teeth were firmly clenched together. Then she bethought her of the muddy ditch below, and taking off her hat she filled it with the water and proceeded to bathe his forehead with her handkerchief. By this she only revealed the ugly cut across his temples, from which the blood continued to flow slowly forth, but did not succeed in restoring the faintest signs of life. By this time she had become thoroughly and dreadfully frightened, and standing up she looked about her in every direction for any indication of human habitation, but neither north, south, east nor west was there the vestige of a living being, or the humblest of cottages to be descried. Only far away at the top of a wooded hill she thought she could discern a thin blue line of smoke stealing sluggishly upwards to the grey and lowering sky.

Then she shouted at the top of her voice for help; but no sound came back to her out of the silence, save the faint mocking echo of her own cries. And at this moment, to make matters still worse, it began to rain.

"Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?" cried the bewildered girl aloud in her despair.

She looked down upon the poor white face that lay upon the trampled and muddy grass at her feet, and saw how the pitiless rain was falling straightly and mercilessly upon it, and all her heart went out in compassion and pity towards him who lay there so still and so helpless. Once more she fell on her knees beside him, and a divine womanly sorrow arising within her, over-

came all her hatred and anger to him, so that her tears streamed freely over her downbent face.

"Oh, poor fellow—poor fellow!" she murmured aloud in broken accents, "is it possible that he can be dead? and only an hour ago he looked so handsome, and brave, and bright, as he sat on his horse amongst the rest! Oh, what am I to do to help him?" but the drenching raindrops only fell down faster and faster upon the white and inanimate face, and nobody answered her cries. Then she realised that she must go for help—she must leave him—and yet how was she to leave him like this?

Out of his pocket where she had found the flask, there had fallen a small penknife. Without a moment's hesitation she picked it up, and cut a large square of cloth out of the skirt of her habit; and it did not even cross her mind that it was a new one, worn to-day for the first time. Then cutting a couple of stakes from the hedge behind her, she so arranged the piece of cloth over the head of the insensible man that it formed a complete shelter to his face. She next attempted to mount her horse, but finding it impossible to get up alone, she started off at a rapid pace across the fields towards the distant line of smoke which seemed to denote the nearest house to which she could go for help.

Helen Dacre never forgot that walk, it was in reality little more than a mile before she reached the substantial farm-house that was her goal, but if it had been five, it could not have been a more painful or terrible experience to her.

It was raining hard, the ground was heavy, and the thick clay soil stuck to her boots and delayed her steps. There was no path, she had to make her way over the hedges and ditches, creeping through gaps and scrambling over railings as best she could. Very soon the ground rose steeply

from the flat fields below, and the ascent of the hill-side added to her labour and her fatigue ; and as she struggled painfully onwards, breathless and trembling, great sobs of compassion and of terror for him she had left behind, rent her bosom now and again with despair and woe.

When, at length, she reached the red brick farm that crowned the hill top, she stumbled, and fell half fainting across the open threshold, at the feet of the astonished farmer, who, by good luck, happened to be coming out of his house.

Perhaps but for Helen Dacre and for the timely succour which, through her efforts, was speedily brought to him, Gilbert Nugent, left in his dangerous condition exposed to the rain and the wind, might, indeed, have died that day. Afterwards, when he was getting better, and the story of her courage and fortitude was told to him as he lay upon his bed, it seemed to him that in very truth he owed to her his life, and that, but for her, he must have perished. But a great many long days had passed away before the knowledge of what she had done for him came home to his clouded intelligence.

For he was very ill, a severe concussion of the brain bereft him for days of all knowledge and all thought, and he lay for some time hovering between life and death, with the odds very much in favour of the latter contingency.

During that time Oldpark assumed the similitude of a hospital. Voices were hushed, and footsteps trod softly about the house, sick nurses, one for day and one for night, were installed upstairs, and doctors came and went, and consulted, and shook their heads and looked grave, for many days. Then with the return of consciousness came high fever, and a new danger to the patient. The height of his temperature, the condition of his strength, were the chief topics of

conversation and of interest, and there was not a thought or a feeling from morning till night amongst them all that did not centre in that darkened sick-room upstairs.

During these weeks — three of them — that dragged their weary length away, one after the other, sundry minor changes took place amongst the inmates of Mr. Greyson's old house.

Lord Bainton, sick to death of the gloom, and secretly bored at having to talk below his breath and creep along the passages on tip-toe, made a few polite excuses to his sister and her husband, and took himself off to a cheerful country house in the adjoining county to which he had received a tempting invitation.

He left his ward behind him, promising to return and see her "bye and bye," a term of beautiful and convenient vagueness which he did not attempt to particularize. Three days after his departure, Ted, in a most crestfallen state of mind, returned to Eton, and Helen cried her eyes out over his departure, giving him a handsome horse-shoe pin set with pearls as a parting present.

There were now only Mrs. Torrington and Helen left in the house with their hosts, and nobody but the doctors and nurses to talk to and think about.

The behaviour of the two women presented a curious contrast. Dora, who was genuinely unhappy and not at all ashamed of being so, wept a great deal, and bemoaned her poor dear Gilbert's condition all day long in unmeasured terms.

Helen Dacre would sit silently by her, listening to her complaints with a little cold and silent scorn in her still and passionless face.

Dora no doubt loved him, and had a right to weep for him! Yet Helen thought that in her place she would not have made quite so public a profession of her grief and her affection. Some-

times too her wails and lamentations took a curious and almost a ludicrous turn.

One evening after the doctor had left the house, with no improvement to speak of in his report, Dora flung herself face downwards upon the sofa in a perfect paroxysm of grief, and Helen attempted in common humanity to give her what consolation she could think of.

"You know," she said, "that we must not expect any improvement till the fourteenth day, and that will not be till the day after to-morrow."

"And how do you suppose I am to go on enduring this suspense till the day after to-morrow? It is all very well for you. Of course you don't care. He is a stranger to you, but he is the best friend I have in the world, and of course I should go into mourning for him. It would be expected of me by everybody, and there are three new dresses I had ordered half-finished at Madame Dentelle's, and I can't have them touched till I know the worst!"

"Oh!" cried Helen, with a touch of indignation. "I can't imagine how you can think about your clothes at such a time!"

"And what else is there to think about, I should like to know? It is not as if I was allowed to nurse the poor dear and be with him, but Camilla is so horribly proper, she won't let me put my nose inside the door, though he wouldn't know me and is probably dying! One can't do anything; people would be shocked if I drove to the meet, only because one is a woman. Men have far slacker codes for themselves. There is Tom hunting regularly as if nothing was wrong, but if I were to be seen on a horse, everybody would be scandalised and call me unfeeling."

"I can't think how you can wish to go. I couldn't bear to go out and amuse myself, although, as you say, Mr. Nugent is nothing to me."

Dora had risen from the sofa and was drying her eyes before the glass.

"Well, nobody can accuse me of want of feeling, I am sure, considering the oceans of tears I've cried! I declare my eyes are swollen half out of my head. I am hideous! I look a perfect fright—don't I?" turning round to Helen with an eager hope that she might deny the question. But Helen only looked at her critically and replied cruelly after a moment's reflection: "I cannot say that you look your best," an answer which naturally did not cause Mrs. Torrington to love her any better.

What Helen herself felt about the sick man, it would be difficult to say. No doubt she shared the general anxiety on his account, and longed and hoped with the rest that he might recover. Often she was conscious of a curiously persistent heart-ache which almost overstepped the limits of ordinary Christian sympathy, but she repeatedly assured herself that this was fully accounted for by the part she had been obliged to play in the story of his accident.

"If he had been a common labourer, whom I had never seen before," she said to herself, "I should have done as much for him, and I should feel exactly the same as I do now."

On the day, however, when at length Gilbert Nugent was definitely pronounced to be out of danger, Helen experienced not only a sense of natural relief, but also an entire revulsion of feeling about him. All her anger and animosity to him seemed to have returned to her, and the more tender feelings which his dangerous condition had awakened in her, died away again entirely.

"I wish I could go away before he is well enough to come out of his bedroom," she thought. "I never want to see him again."

But Lord Bainton had left her at Oldpark under

Lady Camilla's charge, and there seemed no chance at present of his returning to take her away.

Meanwhile, Dora was writing out telegrams to her dressmaker and milliner to finish off her coloured dresses, and to send her down some red felt hats to choose from.

"So lucky, isn't it?" she cried delightedly "Now I can look forward to my lovely pink and gold evening dress again! I really haven't dared to let my thoughts dwell upon it lately! I must positively get it in time for the hunt ball—for of course I can go to that now. Dear me! I thought last week I shouldn't be able to go to another ball for a year!"

Helen could not find it in her heart to express sympathy with these rejoicings.

"How selfish she is," she thought. "Is it possible that she can really love him? I have never loved anybody—at least I am sure what I felt for poor Frederick was not love at all—I dare say I shall never know what it is like, but if I were Mrs. Torrington, and Gilbert Nugent loved me, I fancy—I fancy——"

But what Helen fancied about it was never put into words at all, not even in her innermost thoughts.

CHAPTER X.

"I WILL NOT LET YOU GO."

"If there be no great love in the beginning, yet heaven may decrease it upon better acquaintance, when we have more occasion to know one another: upon familiarity will grow more contempt."

—SHAKESPEARE.

"MISS DACRE, will you not wait one moment?"

Helen was making for the door. Gilbert Nugent had half risen from his chair by the library fire; it was only the second day he had come downstairs; he was very weak and pale, and his thin hands and

the great hollows round his eyes told of the fever-wasted days that he had so lately gone through. The butler and the sick nurse, supporting him one on either side, had led him downstairs and had deposited him in his chair, and then Helen, who had been sitting on the floor in the window with a volume of fine old prints on her lap, rose hastily in order to make her escape.

"Do please stay one minute, I want to speak to you."

She paused irresolutely with her hand upon the door; her eyes fell, and a little nervous flush mounted to her face.

"Pray don't attempt to stand," she said, with cold politeness, "you are not strong enough."

He sank back into his chair,

"You will not go?"

"I will stay for a minute."

"I want to thank you—" he began.

"Pray do nothing of the kind; you have nothing to thank me for," she said hastily.

"I have been told all that you did for me; but for you, I might easily have died."

"I should have done as much for anybody—for a tramp or a beggar," she said coldly.

"That may be, but I must thank you all the same. In all human probability I owe it to you that I am alive at this present moment. Miss Dacre, how am I to thank you? how am I to convince you of my gratitude?"

She lifted her eyes suddenly and met his. Who would have believed that those same eyes had not long since gazed with such tender anxiety into his lifeless face, that they had shed rivers of tears in divinest pity for his fate? There was neither pity nor tenderness in them now, only that same hard, angry glitter which he had seen in them once before, and remembered all too well.

"Spare me both your thanks and your grati-

tude," she said remorselessly. "I do not want either."

"Do you mean to say," he stammered, flushing painfully, "that you are still as determined—after all I have gone through, all you have done for me, that you cannot yet forgive me? Surely things now are changed——"

"Nothing is changed," she interrupted, with a little gesture of anger.

"Then—you mean—you mean—that you will not be friends with me?"

"I will never be friends with you," she replied in a hard voice. His head fell back upon the cushions of his chair. There was a moment of silence, then the soft opening and shutting of the door, and he was alone.

He sat quite still for some minutes, his eyes, with their dark hollow circles, staring vaguely in front of him, his pale face a little paler than usual and his hands nervously clutching the arms of his chair. At length a long sigh broke from his lips.

"My God!" he said aloud, "if I could only make that woman love me!"

As to Helen, she went away with her head erect and her whole figure drawn up with a sense of triumphant victory.

"He shall not think that it was from any weakness towards him, any softening of my heart, that I did what I could for him," she said to herself proudly.

Mrs. Torrington ran up against her in the corridor.

"Gilbert is down, I hear; do you know which room he is in?"

"He is in the library. I have just come from there."

"You?—you have seen him then?"

"Certainly, I have seen him, since I was in the

room when he was brought in," replied Helen carelessly, as she passed her by.

Dora stood for a moment looking after her a little suspiciously. Her pretty face was vaguely troubled ; with the keenness of a jealous nature she began to scent the danger she had been so anxious to ward off.

"I wonder how long they have been alone together," she thought, as she proceeded somewhat thoughtfully towards the library door.

She found Gilbert Nugent abstracted and gloomy ; he scarcely responded to her smile, and the fingers which she took warmly into both her hands lay coldly and irresponsively in her grasp.

"Are you tired, Gilbert?"

"No, thank you, Dora."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you."

She sat down beside him. She had brought the *Times* with her to read aloud to him. He assented quietly when she asked him if she should do so, and she began to read to him, first the items of latest news, and then the leading articles.

The room was very still and quiet. The weather during the last few days had become thoroughly wintry, and through the windows a soft cloud of snow could be seen falling thickly and noiselessly over the world outside. The wood fire burnt redly in the wide grate, the clock ticked on the mantelpiece, and as she turned them over, the sheets of the newspaper rustled and fluttered in Dora's hands.

There was no chance of any disturbance. Mr. Greyson, taking advantage of the inclemency of the weather, which had put hunting out of the question, had gone up to London for the day, and Lady Camilla, at this early hour, was wont to be engaged in long conferences with that important personage, her cook-housekeeper.

Dora had reckoned upon a long morning with her slave. After she had been reading for about a quarter of an hour, she suddenly became aware, with an intuitive and unaccountable instinct, that her companion was not listening to her. She looked up suddenly at him. His eyes were fixed on vacancy—on the falling snow out of doors—he was evidently unaware of the cessation of the monotonous tones of her voice. It was clear to her that his thoughts were engrossed with something else.

"Gilbert!" she said softly.

He started.

"You have not been paying the slightest attention to what I have been reading!"

"I—I really beg your pardon, Dora. I believe I was thinking of something else."

Mrs. Torrington laid the paper beside her on the table.

"Then it's hardly worth my while to go on reading?"

"Please do. I will listen now," he said penitently.

"No. I can see that you are not inclined for the newspaper. Suppose, instead, that you tell me what you were thinking about?"

He turned his face slowly towards her; for a moment his eyes looked questioningly into hers.

"Would you really like me to tell you? I wonder if I might?"

"My dear boy," with a little laugh, "as if there was anything you might not tell me! Are we not pals—the best of pals?"

"Yes," he repeated slowly, "that is true. The best of pals." And then he was silent again for so many minutes that she began to wonder if he was ever going to speak again.

"Well?" she said, playfully at last, laying her hand caressingly upon his.

He started at her touch. Then, with a quick, drawn breath, in which there was a trace of nervousness, he said quickly :

"I will tell you. Dora, since I have been lying upstairs I have had lots of time to think, and I have thought a great deal—about many things."

"About *me* I hope!" with a pitiful attempt at playfulness.

"Well, yes, about you, about you mainly I believe," he admitted. Yet somehow, this assurance did not stop that cold, sick numbness that had begun to creep slowly but surely into her heart.

"That was nice of you," she said, still, poor woman, bent upon shutting her eyes to her own fears.

"You know," he went on, rather quickly and not meeting her eyes, but plucking nervously with his thin fingers at the gimp of the armchair, "You know how long it is that we have been friends—nearly ten years, I believe."

"*Seven* years exactly on the 4th of last August," she amended in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Well, ten or seven, it is pretty much the same, it is half one's youth, anyhow!" with a little uneasy laugh. "It is long enough in any case to grow wise, to see things in a clearer light—to——"

"To *change*, you mean," she put in quickly.

"Well, yes, if you like to put it that way, to change; it is your own word, Dora. You see, I was very young—I was very fond of you——"

She winced a little at the "was." Even a dead love can be raked up into pain at a thoughtless word.

"I—I mean we always hoped, of course, that things might look brighter, that if I got Uncle Ashworth's money for instance, or that those shares of yours in the Transvaal Mines had turned out trumps instead of smashing up altogether. Of

course, it would have been very nice if it had been possible; and if we had been able to marry I daresay we should have been very happy—but as it is—as it is——" and his voice suddenly failed and died away into silence.

She got up from her chair and walked away to the window, and stood for some moments looking out of it with her back to the room.

The snow fell softly and thickly, the park was a sheet of white already, the distance was blotted out in a vague, indistinct whiteness. She stood looking at the familiar scene, decked in the unfamiliar garment of winter, stood whilst the moments sped quickly away and the clock ticked the time behind her in unison to the beatings of her throbbing pulses, and still the snow-flakes kept on falling—falling—falling—like the hopes and joys of her own spoilt and broken life!

Presently she turned round and faced him.

"Say at once that you are sick of me! say it at once honestly!" she cried brokenly.

"My dear girl," with a deprecating gesture and smile, "why call things by ugly names? do you not think yourself, that it is time this unsatisfactory state of things came to an end?"

"You have been making love to someone else," she said angrily.

"No, I swear I have not—I swear it!"

"Then I will not let you go. Why should I? I have your written promise."

"Give it to me back, Dora," he pleaded, "and let us put it in the fire! Surely it is time to end the farce—the thing is dead."

"It may be dead to you," she answered passionately, "and the love you once swore to keep for me, may indeed seem to you but a farce, but to me—to me it is neither dead nor farcical. I will not let you go—for three years more I have your promise to be true to me—if I lose you now,

time to satiety ; and where satiety once sets in, then farewell indeed to love and its faithfulness.

Then perhaps there comes across the troubled and possibly remorseful mind of the lover a new element—a fresh face—a face, younger and fairer, possibly, than hers he knows so well—too well, since he can trace upon it the growth of the tiny wrinkles that have stolen into the once fresh and blooming cheek, and note with painful accuracy the advent of a silver hair amongst the radiant tresses ! The new face, as a matter of course, soon ousts the old from his heart, and brighter eyes and rosier lips provoke him to longings such as the too familiar features have no power to awaken.

After that, his faithlessness can be predicted with certainty. It has become a mere matter of time. Gilbert Nugent, it may be safely averred, did not love Mrs. Torrington any the better for the trying conversation recorded in the last chapter, neither were the relations between the two in any way improved or ameliorated thereby.

A sort of dull dislike to her began to grow up within him ; the tie had become irksome, and she had had neither the wit to perceive it nor the generosity to loosen it ! She had appealed to his honour, and by his honour he still conceived it to be his duty to abide ; but he took no delight in bowing to the claims of this unwelcome duty. And in proportion as his heart grew colder and harder towards her, so did his dawning interest in Helen Dacre thrive and flourish.

Helen's attitude towards him provoked and tormented him. He thought about her constantly, listened for her footstep and her voice, and watched her furtively and with interest.

It may be easily imagined that all these signs and tokens did not escape Mrs. Torrington's notice ; a sure instinct made her keenly alive to them, and a passion of jealousy raged at her heart to-

wards the other woman, younger and fairer than herself.

She was forced, however, to admit that Helen took no more notice of Nugent than she did of the silent figures in armour at the foot of the oak staircase.

During the next few days the invalid improved rapidly in health and strength, and began to take his place as before in the family circle.

A day came, when a rapid thaw, that caused the disappearance of the snow as by magic, and a warm and sunshiny morning, induced the doctor to recommend that his patient should go out for a drive.

Lady Camilla ordered the barouche, and it was arranged that she and Dora should drive the convalescent man to the meet, whilst Mr. Greyson and Helen were to follow the hounds.

The riders started first, and the barouche came round the corner just five minutes after the disappearance of the two horses along the drive. Dora was standing by herself just inside the open front door, and the footman was by the carriage outside, when she heard a step upon the ground and the voice of a stranger inquiring if Miss Dacre was in. The servant replied that she was not.

"But she is staying here, is she not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you tell me when she is likely to be in?"

"I could not say, sir," was the well-trained domestic's discreet reply.

Dora, impelled by curiosity, came forward and looked out. Outside the door stood a man, who might have belonged almost to any class of life. He might have been a shabby gentleman, or he might have been a respectably dressed tradesman.

Dora's first impression, indeed, was that he was a dun, and had come to press for the payment of a bill. He had a reddish beard, sloping shoulders

and a narrow chest, and about the worst hat and boots that she had ever beheld.

Judging him by his outer man, she decided, without hesitation, that he was not a gentleman, and demanded of him, somewhat imperiously, what he wanted.

The stranger turned round, lifted his detestably bad hat from a high forehead crowned with a thatch of sandy hair, and replied that he wished particularly to see Miss Dacre.

The voice was that of an educated man, and Mrs. Torrington perceived that her first impressions had done him an injustice.

"Miss Dacre has just gone out hunting. Did you not meet her riding down the drive?"

"No; I must have come by the other road," answered the stranger.

"You will be sure to see her, if you call again about five o'clock," said Mrs. Torrington politely, wondering who this shabby-genteel young man could possibly be.

He shook his head.

"I am afraid I shall be unable to do that; very important affairs oblige me to return to London by the four o'clock train. I only came on business for one night to this neighbourhood."

"Can I give any message for you to Miss Dacre?"

"I am much obliged to you. No—there is nothing but what I can write, but perhaps you will kindly give her my card?" He took one out of his pocket and gave it to her. Then he raised his hat and walked away down the road.

Mrs. Torrington looked down at the card. On it was inscribed in Roman characters, "Mr. Frederick Warne," and in the corner, "Classical Professor, South London High School."

She turned it over contemptuously. It was a vulgar little card. Not the kind of card which, in

the world to which she was accustomed, a gentleman would have had printed to leave upon his acquaintances.

"It is like a trademan's circular!" she muttered. "What can such a dreadful-looking person have to do with Helen Dacre, I wonder!"

Then she slipped the card into her pocket, and determined to be guided by circumstances.

Lady Camilla and Nugent now appeared upon the scene, and the barouche set forth.

Helen had a thoroughly enjoyable day's hunting, and rode her handsome horse straightly and well, earning Mr. Greyson's approbation and gaining confidence in herself and her animal by her performances.

When she got home it was late, and she was tired. Naturally she had seen nothing of the party in the carriage, who had, in fact, returned in time for luncheon.

Lady Camilla was still sitting by the tea-table in the hall, when Helen and Mr. Greyson came in, and merely removing her hat the girl sank down wearily upon the nearest chair as she accepted her hostess' offer of a cup of tea.

"You have had a nice day, my dear?" enquired Lady Camilla kindly, as she handed her the tea.

"Oh, it has been delightful!" cried Helen, with enthusiasm. "I certainly think that hunting is the most perfect amusement in the world;"

"And you went very well, my dear, very well," said the master of the house approvingly, as he stood upon the hearthrug, with his back to the fire, gulping down his tea. "Ted would have been proud of you. You only want a little more experience to do very well indeed. Where's Dora?" turning to his wife.

"She is upstairs, deep in the delights of a huge packing-case which has just arrived from her dressmaker's. Her new ball dress, I believe."

"Why doesn't she come out too, instead of pottering about all day after Nugent? She'll never make half the sportswoman that Helen is, even now. The fact is she is eaten up with vanity—clothes and flirtations! She thinks of nothing else."

"Oh, poor Dora," laughed Lady Camilla good-naturedly. "You are rather hard upon her, Tom. She rides very nicely, but of course you can't expect her to be so keen about hunting as a young thing like Helen, who is new to it! Besides everybody isn't alike. She can't at her age, be expected to change her nature!"

"More's the pity," replied her husband gruffly. "Dora might change a good many things that are natural to her with advantage."

And then he stalked away to his study, slamming the door energetically behind him as he went out.

There were a few minutes of silence. Lady Camilla, who always had on hand a long piece of grey woollen crochet, which she called her "poor-work," and was destined at some remote period to keep the cold out of some old woman's rheumatic bones, plied her long bone needle industriously, and Helen sipped her tea, gazing reflectively into the fire as she did so.

"Lady Camilla!" she said, at last.

"Yes, my love."

"I wish you would tell me something I want to know very much."

"Certainly, Helen, if I can. What is it?"

"Is Mrs. Torrington engaged to be married to Mr. Nugent, or no?"

Lady Camilla counted six stitches of her grey worsted, cast off four and knit two together, before she made any reply. Then she said slowly and rather hesitatingly:

"No—I should say not. What makes you think she is?"

"Everything. She takes possession of him. She calls him by his Christian name. She seems devoted to him."

"My dear child," said Lady Camilla, after another little pause, during which a great many things rushed headlong through her mind. A desire to take advantage of the opportunity presented to her, a desire to say nothing unjust or compromising to her cousin, and above all a desire to be exceedingly discreet—to say enough, and yet not to say too much. All these conflicting claims caused her to take her time about answering.

"I am rather perplexed how to answer your question," she began at last. "Certainly there is a great friendship on both sides, that dates from many years ago, which accounts for the familiarities you mention, which do not, however, in themselves amount to anything at all. It is possible indeed that at one time the friendship might possibly have led to marriage——"

"Ah!—then they love each other?" Helen said, rather breathlessly, leaning forward in her chair.

"No—I don't think so. That sort of thing is over—and—to be frank with you—well—I will tell you a secret"—Lady Camilla lowered her voice to a whisper—"Dear Dora is a little bit led away by foolish vanity in the matter. She shuts her eyes, I fancy, to what everybody else has seen long ago—poor Gilbert is tired of her!"

"*Poor* Gilbert, indeed!" cried Helen indignantly. "I think it is horrid of him! horrid!"

"Oh, my dear, how can he help it? all men do tire in time."

"Then all men are contemptible! If he has loved her once he should love her for ever! True love is eternal!"

"Ah, my dear child, that is merely the delusion

of your youth and ignorance ! You will find out that it is not at all the case, as you grow older and wiser ! " laughed Lady Camilla softly. And then she placed her finger suddenly upon her lip and whispered, " Hush ! "

The door behind her had opened quietly and Gilbert Nugent entered.

" You are back from hunting ? " he said, looking at Helen, who made no answer.

" Yes, they have had a capital day ! " replied Lady Camilla briskly ; and then suddenly she made some curiously convulsive jerks with her worsted and her crochet needle.

" There ! " she exclaimed, " I've done it again ! dropped all my stitches, and got the wool into a tangle, and my eyes are so bad I shall never put it right myself. Here, Helen, you are young, you must do it for me," and she tossed the " poor-work " bodily into Helen's lap. " Get it right please, my dear, before you go up to dress. I must rush off and see if my good man wants me, before the post goes out."

" And if he doesn't say something interesting to her in the twenty minutes it will take her to do that job," she said to herself, as she hurried away, " Gilbert Nugent isn't the man I take him for ! Dora is safe out of the way, and anybody with half an eye can see who he is in love with ! Well, I'll give him a chance anyhow—poor Gilbert. What a splendid thing it would be for him to be sure ! and till that girl is married to somebody else, I really shall never be sure of Bainton ! "

CHAPTER XII.

THE NEW LOVE.

"But all was false and hollow ; though his tongue
Dropped manna."

—MILTON.

HELEN and Gilbert Nugent were left alone. For some moments neither of them spoke a word. Helen drew her chair nearer to the table, upon which stood the lamp, and occupied herself industriously in endeavouring to unravel Lady Camilla's tangled worsted. Nugent sat opposite to her, devouring her with his eyes.

Her hair was somewhat ruffled out of its habitual order ; her face was a little flushed with her gallop through the fresh air, her lithe young figure in its close-fitting habit bent low over her task, and her long eye-lashes swept in a dark shadow upon her cheek. Nugent had no inclination for some minutes to break the silence—his eyes took in every detail of her face and form, and revelled in its fascination.

As he watched the long, slender fingers, moving dexterously in and out of the coarse grey worsted, he told himself that they were weaving the meshes of his fate. It was something to sit and watch her unreprieved, and yet probably because the heart of man is never satisfied and his desires for ever unappeased, the picture, delightful as it was, presently seemed to him to be incomplete, unless those veiled lids might be uplifted, so that he might see the eyes beneath them.

To accomplish this object he broke the silence at last.

"Miss Dacre—won't you look at me?"

"I have got something more important to look at," she replied demurely

"Something more interesting, no doubt?"

"Much more interesting." This with the ghost of a smile; but the eyes that he longed to see never lifted themselves for so much as a second from the poor-work.

He grew desperate.

All at once he reached forward his hand and laid it upon both hers, holding them and the poor-work, needle and all, firmly together.

"But I will make you look at me! I will make you speak to me! You shall not scorn and insult me any longer—I will not endure it."

Her hands lay passive beneath his grasp upon her knee. She did not struggle to free them; she made no sign of resentment, although her colour deepened, but she did not lift her eyes.

"It is impossible," he went on with agitation, "that because of that stupid speech you overheard weeks ago, before I had ever seen you—before I knew what you were—that you can go on sending me to an everlasting Coventry!"

"I have only forbidden you to speak to me."

"But I never promised that I would not."

The smile broadened upon her face.

"No. You would have kept such a promise very badly, I fancy."

"Shockingly badly. Helen, have you sworn not to look at me? for goodness sake lift your eyes!"

"If you will take your hand from mine, and if you will apologise for calling me by my Christian name, and promise——"

"I will promise anything—apologise for everything!" he cried, obeying her also in the matter of the hand, "if only you will look at me and say you forgive me."

And then at last she did look up. But somehow, instead of the cold and angry hardness which

had always greeted him out of their deep grey depths, there was something in her eyes that was new and unexpected—something of trouble and of vague disturbance.

"I will forgive you if you really wish it," she said softly. "As you say, it is past, and one cannot keep up resentment for ever, it would be childish, I suppose. Anything is better than this tragic and dramatic state of things! don't let us say anything more about it. I will try and forget that unlucky remark of yours, and I will try to be civil to you."

"Civil! I ask for bread and you give me a stone! I want your friendship, your interest, and yet, no, that is not true, for I want more—I want more than that from you."

He was close to her now, bending down towards her; there was passion in his voice and in his eager eyes. She rose hurriedly from her chair.

"You have no right—no right," she stammered brokenly, and began rolling up her poor-work hastily together with nervous, trembling hands.

"Don't go! — don't go! Listen to me at least!"

"I cannot listen," she answered, turning away. "You can have nothing to say to me—nothing!"

And all the time she seemed to hear a voice that cried to her "He is false—he is false! he has already given his faith to another—you must not hear what he has to say."

It was a cruel voice—a voice against which her heart rebelled and fought, and yet which compelled her to listen and to obey.

"Why are you frightened of me?" he persisted, following her to the foot of the staircase; "if you knew—if I might only tell you all that I want to say——"

But he never did tell her. For at that very moment there was a little scornful laugh from

above their heads and a mocking voice cried out from the landing above :

"*Are* you two playing at 'hide and seek,' may I ask? or is it 'Catch me if you can' or 'Kiss in the ring'?"

Mrs. Torrington, in soft white silk—the kind of silk that does not rustle and gives no warning of its approach—was coming down the staircase out of the gloom of the wide landing above.

Crimson with shame and annoyance, poor Helen darted upstairs, brushing by her without so much as a look or a word, and fled tumultuously along the corridor to her own room.

Dora laughed anew as she came on slowly down the staircase.

"Were you making love to Miss Dacre, Gilbert?"

He looked supremely foolish, as a man is apt to do, when he is found out doing something he is ashamed of.

"My dear Dora, how perfectly ridiculous! Why should I make love to Miss Dacre, pray?"

"I am sure I don't know," with a little shrug of the shoulders, "but Uncle Ashworth's money might perhaps afford a clue to the mystery!"

Nugent looked furious. She could hardly have said anything to anger him more. It was probably why she said it, an intimate knowledge of his character giving her the whip-hand over him. He turned away from her with an oath, which he took no trouble to conceal.

"You need not swear at me," she said coldly. "Of course, I am not a fool, and I see a great many things you had rather I did not see, but I advise you not to provoke me with regard to Helen Dacre—you see, I could so very easily spoil your game, my poor boy, if you were to try me too far! It would be hardly worth your while to attempt it, would it?"

That evening, when dinner was over and the ladies were alone in the drawing-room—Lady Camilla having settled down in her own particular arm-chair with the evening paper on her lap, for her habitual after-dinner snooze—Mrs. Torrington came softly across the room and sat down on the sofa by Helen's side.

There was a conciliating smile on her pretty childish face, and she laid her hand caressingly upon Helen's as she sat down beside her.

"My dear child, I do hope you are not vexed with me for laughing at you and Gilbert Nugent this evening."

"Vexed, Mrs. Torrington, how could I be vexed? I fear, on the contrary, that it was I who unwittingly annoyed you." Helen felt dreadfully uncomfortable and self-conscious as she said this, and she blurted out her words lamely and nervously.

Mrs. Torrington pressed her hand affectionately and smiled anew.

"Oh, no, my dear Helen. I was not in the very least annoyed, how could I be?" she said sweetly. "I ought not to have laughed, but you have no idea how funny you and Gilbert looked running across the hall after each other!"

Helen reddened. To have felt oneself to be at the very crisis of one's life, and to be told afterwards that one has looked "funny" in that situation, is perhaps the most galling imputation that a human being can be called upon to endure.

"I really quite thought for the first minute that you were playing at a new kind of game together—I really did!" continued Dora serenely, "but, of course, it was only some of Gilbert's nonsense, as he told me afterwards—he is such a terrible flirt, you know—but then, he is a dear, naughty fellow, and it means nothing at all with him."

"He told you—he told you that—that he had

been flirting with me?" enquired Helen grimly, looking at her straightly, with a hard, angry look in her eyes.

"Oh, not of course in so many words!" laughed Mrs. Torrington quite gaily, "but I understand his little ways so well! and you know I have such implicit faith in my dear Gilbert—he has been so devoted to me for years—so true and so constant, dear fellow, that I never object to his amusing himself with a pretty girl by a little harmless flirtation. I could not be so ungenerous, could I? knowing how loving and loyal to me he really is at heart!"

There was a little silence. Helen looked straight before her, her lips were pressed closely together, and in the eyes that her companion could not see, because she had turned her head a little away, there was the dreary blank of a miserable despair, for at that moment she knew, what perhaps nothing but that grinding aching pain at her heart could have revealed to her, that she loved Gilbert Nugent!

When she spoke at last, there was no signal of distress to be detected in either voice or face.

"You and he are lovers then? you love each other? it is what I had thought and guessed. I am very glad that you are happy."

Then she rose quietly from her place and went across the room to find Lady Camilla's work-basket and the still dilapidated poor-work of grey worsted which she had left before dinner in a worse plight than before. She did not talk to Mrs. Torrington again.

There was a tumult of anger and of misery at her heart, but worse than either was the burning anguish of a shame which seemed to strike at her very life! Shame that she should be made a sport for these two who loved one another! Perhaps he had guessed her secret, perhaps, in spite of her

animosity and her resentment, he had perceived the dreadful truth which she herself had only this hour discovered! Had seen through her paltry pretence of enmity, and pitied her no doubt for her supreme foolishness!

"Well, a woman, thank God, has always her pride to fall back upon, and, for all the agony that tore at her soul, Helen had the fortitude to hide her wounds and to present a calm and smiling face to her tormentors. The sound of the door as it opened to admit the gentlemen went through her head like the stab of a knife.

She did not look up, but she knew that Gilbert Nugent was in the room. Knew too that he was coming straight towards the little table where she sat at work.

"What! not done with that unfortunate poor-work yet?" said his cheery voice close over her head. She looked up and forced herself to smile, to smile as though she did not care.

"No—it takes time you see. Lady Camilla will be wanting it presently," she answered mechanically, without a very clear idea of what she was saying.

Nugent sat down as though by fatality upon a chair next to her own.

Why did he not go to his own Dora? to whom he was so true and constant? Why did he press his meaningless attentions upon a girl whom he despised and derided?

"By the way, Helen——" She looked up quickly, Mrs. Torrington stood beside her—from the other side of the room she had swooped down upon them both—the case was urgent and needed desperate measures—"I quite forgot to tell you—a gentleman called upon you this morning."

"A gentleman? upon *me*, Mrs. Torrington?"

"Yes, and he was *so* sorry to miss you! he left all sorts of pretty messages with me for you—was

it not careless and stupid of me to forget to tell you about him?"

"I cannot think who you mean; who could it have been?" said Helen perplexedly—"I don't think I know a gentleman in the world who could possibly want to see me!"

"Oh, he wanted to see you most dreadfully! I assure you I scented quite a little romance in the poor fellow's disappointed face when he found you were out—he could not call again he said—but I was to give you his love and to say he would write to you, and he was *so, so* sorry to miss you——"

"My dear Mrs. Torrington you quite bewilder me! I cannot conceive who it could have been!"

Nugent was looking at her keenly. She could almost feel his eyes upon her.

"I can't remember his name, but he gave me his card—Ah, here it is! I have it in my pocket!"

She laid the scrap of cardboard upon the little table between them.

There it lay—face uppermost—with its little vulgar characters staring at her.

"Mr. Frederick Warne."

Nugent read the name too. Then he looked back at her and saw that she was as white as ashes.

"Who is it? Who is Mr. Frederick Warne when he is at home, pray?" he asked with a sort of breathless intensity.

"He is only the nephew of my old school-mistress," she stammered.

"Is that all?" with a gasp of relief.

"Yes, that is all," she answered, and put the offending card quickly away into her pocket.

CHAPTER XIII.

LORD BANTON GOES TO A BALL.

"She in thee
Calls back the lovely April of her prime."
—SHAKESPEARE.

A MORE brilliant spectacle than was to be witnessed in the Town Hall at Oldchester on the night of the Meadowshire Hunt Ball, it would indeed be difficult to imagine.

The large and lofty rooms, decorated with flags and coloured bunting and splendidly illuminated, were admirably suited to the purpose. The music was of the best, the supper excellent, and the floor all that could be desired. Everybody congratulated the busy stewards upon the great and unqualified success of the evening.

The rooms were thronged. Never, within the memory of man, said the country squires and squiresses who lined the walls, to one another, had there been known such a well attended and thoroughly delightful ball.

Meadowshire is famous for its pretty women, and the fair sex, whose charms were for the most part enhanced by smart London-made dresses and by many splendid and flashing diamonds, had mustered in great force, whilst the crowds of hunting men in their scarlet dress coats added an éclat to the gay scene, which the presence of the male sex in its depressing and dismal ordinary evening costume does not usually afford.

But numerous and dazlingly attired as were the beautiful women in the room, there were still many people who looked with interest after a tall, graceful girl clad in white, and not a few were the questions

asked and the favourable criticisms passed concerning her.

"Lord Bainton's ward, is she? She is a very striking-looking girl," said one man to another.

"Yes—not exactly beautiful—and yet there is something almost better than beauty about her—she is very attractive."

"She is an heiress, too, I hear," said the first speaker. "Old Ashworth left her all his money."

"Lucky Lord Bainton!" ejaculated the other significantly.

"Oh, is that his game, do you suppose?"

"Bound to be, I should think. An old bachelor, when he thinks of marriage, should look out for a young and handsome wife, and the money is no drawback—naturally."

"But young Greyson was to be his heir, I thought?"

"Not likely; he detests his brother-in-law; besides, he is not the man to allow such a chance to slip!"

"Ah! poor Lady Camilla! She has a formidable rival—the girl is charming."

And the two speakers moved away.

Now the whole of this conversation was overheard by no less a person than Lord Bainton himself. He was certainly not addicted to dancing, and it was many years since he had been present at such a scene as this. But as some of the party from the house where he was staying were going to this ball, he suddenly expressed a desire to join them, and somewhat to the surprise of his hosts took his place in the private omnibus, when it came round to the door after dinner, to convey the ball-goers a ten miles drive into Oldchester.

The fact is, that a secret desire to see what his ward would look like at her first ball, and to notice the effect she produced upon others, had made him determine to be present upon the occasion.

The party he was with arrived somewhat late, and it was whilst pressing in amongst the crowd about the doorway that he caught sight of the graceful, white-robed figure of his ward as she was whirled by in the throng of waltzers and became at the same time an unwilling listener to the conversation above recorded, concerning her and himself.

After the speakers had gone, he remained for some moments leaning against the frame of the doorway, plunged in thought. It cannot be said with truth that such an idea as these two gossips had suggested was absolutely new to him, because the thought had already arisen within his heart many times before ; but to hear it put into words for the first time by other people, did certainly give a fresh impetus to the hitherto scarcely acknowledged desire.

"Why not?" he said to himself as he stood there watching the gay revolving throng. "Why not?"

He had a shrinking horror of making himself ridiculous, a morbid terror of what people would say of him. If he had heard them call him an old fool, it is quite possible that he would have told himself that the idea was folly, and that he would have dismissed it from his mind as impracticable. But these two men who had discussed the subject so glibly, had not seemed to think it ridiculous at all—on the contrary!

"An old bachelor should look out for a young and handsome wife," they had said. "Well, why not—why not?"

Their words had set him thinking deeply.

As he stood there, Helen on the arm of her partner, a young fellow who, in spite of his youthful appearance, was evidently an excellent dancer, passed once more close before him in the crowd. He could not help noticing with critical eyes, to

which a new motive for criticism was now imparted, how exceedingly charming and graceful she looked. His blood, despite his sixty years, beat a little quicker in his veins at the sight of her fairness. Was all this beauty destined perchance to be for him? He could not refrain from drawing a picture of her in his imagination, embellished by the family diamonds which now lay uselessly in the strong box at his bankers, and adorned by all the prestige and *éclat* of his own name and position. She would become that position well, he thought. He was fond and proud of her now as his ward—he would be fonder and prouder of her still as his wife!

And after all—why not? What was there to prevent his doing as he liked? Ted Greyson was a very nice boy certainly, and his own god-son, but a man is not bound to sacrifice himself for his god-son; he was fond of Camilla, and if she felt disappointed, he should be sorry—but of course he could not help that, and, besides, as that man had truly said, he detested his brother-in-law—why on earth should he not consider his own claims before those of his relations? Why not, indeed?

Man, being an inherently selfish animal, as is well known, seldom continues this line of argument long. The matter is very soon settled, and always in the same direction—his own favour.

Lord Bainton speedily came to the conclusion that Camilla and her son would have to go to the wall, and that he should certainly do as he liked. After which he walked across the ball-room, the waltz having just come to an end, and shook hands with his ward.

“I must congratulate you upon your toilette, my dear—upon your charming appearance altogether, and upon your evident success,” he said, as he pressed her small white-gloved hand affectionately.

Helen, flushed with her dance and with the heat of the room, was looking her best, her eyes shone

with innocent pleasure at her guardian's kind words. She was genuinely and thoroughly fond of him.

"I am so glad you like my dress," she answered, simply and gratefully.

"Is your card quite full?"

"Quite, I am afraid. But if you would like me to give up a dance, and sit and talk to you——"

His face fell a little.

"Oh—you think me too old for a partner, I suppose?" he answered, with a little annoyance. "I suppose you think I have forgotten how to dance!"

"Oh, no, no! dear Lord Bainton! Of course I don't!" cried Helen eagerly. "I'll dance with you with pleasure—any dance you like."

And so the astonishing spectacle was soon displayed to the whole town and county there assembled, of old Lord Bainton standing up by his young ward's side in a set of Lancers.

It may be imagined that Lady Camilla beheld this wonderful sight with eyes of extreme dismay and disfavour.

Her brother's face, radiant with satisfaction and beaming with smiles, filled her with horrible apprehensions. The way in which he turned towards his youthful partner, bobbing his head towards her to whisper in her ear, and bending with old-fashioned gallantry over her hand, struck her with a cold chill of consternation.

She had been right then in her surmises! Bainton was evidently in love with the girl! She had never known him distinguish any unmarried woman by such attentions. Within the memory of man no one had ever seen Lord Bainton dance before!

"It is monstrous—horrible!" she whispered to her husband, who stood by her; "he is making himself conspicuous and ridiculous to the whole

room—what is to be done to stop it? Oh, Tom, think of our poor Ted—what a cruel injury it will be to his prospects!”

“I’ve always told you not to reckon upon your brother, my dear—Bainton was never to be trusted; he was bound to marry some day. Better put Ted’s prospects out of your thoughts—he must take his chance,” and Mr. Greyson, who did not take the matter very deeply to heart, moved away to speak to some acquaintances, and Lady Camilla was left to bear her trouble alone.

For it was a dreadful trouble to her! Ted was her idol, and her ambitions for him were insatiable. Oldpark, though a beautiful place, was by no means a rich inheritance—its expenses were greater than its resources. She and her husband had always lived extravagantly, and quite up to the limits of their income. There had been losses too, and charges on the estate and old debts to be paid off; for many years Mr. Greyson had been crippled by the mountain load of liabilities bequeathed to him by the elder brother, whom he had succeeded. At his father’s death Ted was certain to be a poor man, and would in all probability be unable to live upon the property he would inherit. Oldpark would have to be let—possibly even to be sold. But Lady Camilla had always consoled herself by the reflection that her brother would die unmarried, and that Ted would, as a matter of course, be his heir. For that end she had always striven, and to keep her brother without a wife had been the effort of her life. His own indolence and selfishness had helped her. Bainton had been always unwilling to burden himself with the responsibilities of matrimony, and as he grew older his bachelor habits and customs increased upon him, so that she had long ceased to fear that he would change his way of life. Now, however, all her anxieties were renewed. The advent of this handsome ward

of his had revolutionised the old gentleman's existence.

He had taken her abroad—he had devoted himself to her amusement—he evinced a lively interest in her progress, and even in her dresses ; it was impossible to say where his infatuation would end ! To-night he had actually gone out after his dinner, at the risk of his digestion, and driven ten miles, cramped up in a family omnibus, in order to meet her at a ball—and now he was actually dancing with her ! There was no knowing what would be the next step ! Lady Camilla felt that despair was settling down upon her soul !

As she stood straining her eyes to watch the faces of the couple in whom she took so painful an interest, a short laugh close beside her made her turn angrily round.

"Poor dear Camilla ! I really am sorry for you. It looks like an accomplished fact, doesn't it ?" And Dora Torrington, with mischief in her laughing eyes, made an almost imperceptible gesture with her fair head towards the moving figures in the dance.

"It is more than half your fault !" retorted her cousin angrily. "If you had chosen you might have prevented it. You might still prevent it, in fact, if you liked."

"Prevent an old man making a fool of himself ? I really don't see by what magical powers I should be able to do that."

"If the girl could be brought to refuse him——"

"If ! My dear Camilla, what girl in her senses would say 'no' to the Earl of Bainton, and the property in Cheshire, and the house in Portman Square, and the family diamonds, and, best of all, to the prospects of a widow's jointure within an appreciable distance of time ! No, no, your brother may be a fool, but most assuredly Helen Dacre is not one. She will jump at him !"

"Not if you would let Nugent fall in love with her, which he is quite ready to do——"

"Many thanks!" and there was a vicious flash in the childlike blue eyes. "I don't seem to see it. Gilbert is a 'poor thing' doubtless, but still 'all mine own.'"

"If you were only commonly grateful to me you would have made my brother flirt with you. It would have amused you, and done me a good service——"

"Because you know very well that he never would lose his head to the point of offering marriage to me! Upon my word, Camilla, you have a most amusingly selfish way of looking at things!"

"Take care, Dora, you may carry your sneers too far. As to marriage, nobody will marry you, my dear girl. Neither my brother, nor Gilbert Nugent, nor anybody else!" She turned her back angrily upon her and moved away amongst the crowd.

A partner came up to claim Mrs. Torrington for the next dance. There was no trace of vexation or discomfiture in her smiling face as she placed her hand upon the young man's arm, and answered some trifling compliment with a coquettish glance and toss of her pretty head, nor could he or anyone else in the room have possibly guessed from her bright looks and pleasant manner what a tempest of rage and hatred was storming at her heart.

CHAPTER XIV

“YES, OR NO?”

“Dare to be true, nothing can need a lie,
The fault that needs it most grows two thereby.”

—GEORGE HERBERT.

THE Hunt Ball was nearly at an end. The crowd was rapidly thinning, there was room now to move about, to talk to one's friends, and to enjoy oneself without being squashed into a pancake, or smashed into a jelly. Nobody now trampled upon the tail of the ladies' dresses, or stamped upon the toes of the gentlemen's patent leather pumps. Above all, there was room to dance with ease and comfort, and about fifty couples still spun vigorously and with unabated energy round and round the large square room.

Helen, for the moment, was not dancing. She stood a little apart, watching the rest. She was not at all tired, although her dark hair was a little ruffled, and her pretty dress showed signs of the night's encounters. She had enjoyed herself on the whole very much indeed. She had danced every single dance, and she was conscious of having been admired and noticed—at twenty a young woman, however simple minded, cannot be impervious to a success of this kind. Helen had frankly and honestly appreciated the little triumph which her fresh young charms had called forth. Her first ball had been a source of real enjoyment to her. And yet—there was something wanting to her!

As she stood leaning back against the wall, fanning herself and looking at the dancers, she was

quite unable to put her finger accurately upon the "crumpled rose leaf" in her lot.

Gilbert Nugent had not once asked her to dance !

The realization of this was very bitter to her. What was the admiration of other men to her, if his were wanting? Did he indeed scorn and despise her so much? Had he guessed her unmaidenly secret, and did he feel a contemptuous dislike to the girl who, not satisfied with robbing him of his birthright, had also shown to him so plainly the shameful weakness of her heart?

Poor Helen tortured herself with these perplexing questions. But whilst she stood there nursing her wounded pride and her disappointed hopes, the objects of her secret thought stood suddenly before her.

"Not dancing, Miss Dacre? What a piece of luck for me! Come and have a turn."

Before she could frame an answer Nugent had passed his arm round her waist and had borne her lightly out into the middle of the room.

Gilbert was a perfect dancer, and the keen physical enjoyment of waltzing with him was for the first few moments all that Helen could think about,

When they stopped at last after three or four turns round the room, Helen exclaimed, a little breathlessly :

"That was indeed lovely! I have not had such a waltz the whole evening!"

Her eyes were glowing, her face flushed. The pure joy of being with the man who had become by some wonderful miracle suddenly dear to her, lent a new tenderness and charm to her whole aspect. Nugent had never yet seen her like this.

He gave a swift glance round the room. Dora was nowhere to be seen; he had left her at the supper table between two attentive youths, safely

engaged with a plateful of "*Galantine aux Truffes*," he had reckoned—guilty man! that it would take her at least twenty minutes to get through that plate alone, to say nothing of the possibility of jelly and grapes to follow.

"Do you know," he said, looking back at his partner, "that the principal reason I have for dancing with you is that I may ask you a question?"

"What a formidable announcement! It sounds alarming."

"It is not alarming at all, Miss Dacre, but my question is a serious one to me, at least."

Helen's heart beat a little quickly.

"Don't keep me in suspense, then!" she laughed nervously, "pray ask your question, Mr. Nugent."

"Ah—but will you answer it?"

"Certainly—if I can."

"You can certainly answer it—but will you? Will you answer it faithfully and truthfully?"

"I don't think I am untruthful," said Helen in a low voice.

"Forgive me. Promise me then that whatever your reply may be it shall at least be a perfectly honest and true one?"

Vaguely disturbed, she hardly knew why, Helen gave him the required promise.

"You *will* tell me the truth, then?" he repeated, as though unable to insist sufficiently often upon this point.

"Yes, I will certainly tell you the truth," she said once more. She had not the vaguest idea what his question was likely to be.

"I am going to tell you something first—something that I will put into a little parable," he began. "I do not ask you to say one word about that, only to listen to my foolish story, so that when you have heard it you may give me a plain answer, 'yes,' or 'no,' to what I shall ask you afterwards. Listen.

There was a poor beggar who had not a penny in the world, luck had always been dead against him, and in addition to his poverty he was tied by the leg to a great, heavy load of stone which he had to drag about after him wherever he went. The stone had been only a very small one when, years ago, he himself had allowed it to be fastened on, but by degrees it had grown bigger and bigger, and the chains became heavier and stronger, so that he did not know how to get rid of it. One day he saw a chance of escape, or rather he saw something which made him think that it might be worth his while to struggle for freedom. It was just a half-opened door—a door that led, I think, into Heaven! Impossible to drag his stone with him through that golden threshold—if he hoped ever to cross it he must first get rid of that hideous weight—he must do battle and fight for his liberty. This is what he longed to do. But there came a warning voice—an evil voice that mocked him, and the voice told him that he would be wasting his time, because the angel who guarded the door he longed to enter, would only shut it in his face were he to present himself before the entrance, so that he had better be wise in time, and go on dragging about his chains and his burden to the end of the chapter. That is my little story, Miss Dacre, what do you think about that poor fellow?”

“I think he would be a coward not to rid himself of such an incubus as you describe, at whatever cost, not because of any angel, but for his own sake and for the sake of his own manliness and honour.”

She spoke impetuously and hotly—the story did not seem to apply to herself, nor to anybody she knew. Nugent was looking at her intently and earnestly. He saw that she had not understood his meaning.

“Now for my question then. And pray remem-

ber to look upon it as the context of my parable. A few days ago, Miss Dacre, a gentleman appears to have called upon you and 'left his card.'

Every scrap of colour left her face.

“It would of course be an impertinence on my part were I to question you concerning your friends and your visitors. You were good enough to inform me that this gentleman is a nephew of the school-mistress who brought you up. He is presumably therefore an old friend.”

“Yes,” she gasped, “you are right—an old friend.”

“Now tell me the truth. Remember you have promised me the truth. Is he not more than a friend?”

A dead silence. The meaning of the story he had told her flashed upon her fully. He himself was the poor man—the weight of stone of whom he was tired was Dora, to whom he was engaged and whom he longed to be rid of; and the open door—the angel he longed to reach! ah! it was all clear as daylight to her now! Gilbert Nugent loved her!

In the tumult of this wonderful discovery, she could not utter a word! Her heart beat so wildly, that instinctively she pressed her hand against the bodice of her dress; her colour went and came—a great and rapturous joy throbbed through every pulse of her being.

A swift flash of her tell-tale eyes into his face told her that he was watching her with an intense eagerness, waiting for her to speak.

“Is he more to you than friend?” he asked her once again. “Yes—or no—I want no more.”

She would have to answer him. A horrible faintness came over her. How was she to tell him the horrible truth—how in one word to dash away the cup of happiness for ever from her lips! He had asked her for truth, but how was she to speak

this truth, which would plunge her for ever into the dark hopelessness of an absolute despair? No, she could not do it! She would rid herself of Frederick Warne, of his hateful pretensions, of the hold which in the days of her foolish ignorance she had allowed him to gain over her. She would write to him, break off everything, appeal to her guardian for protection against him if necessary, but she would not continue to be bound to so detestable an individual any longer.

Gilbert Nugent loved her!—for her sake he was ready to shake himself free of Mrs. Torrington and her claims upon him—for her sake that is, if she were worthy of the sacrifice—would he think her so if he knew that she was Fredrick Warne's betrothed? Oh! she could not own to such a degradation.

So the temptation was too much, and the lie—that lie whose consequences were to be so fatal, was spoken—never alas to be recalled or retrieved.

"No!" she said at length, slowly and deliberately.

"He is nothing to you?"

"Nothing," she said once more.

But she did not dare to look up or meet his eyes with that lie upon her lips. She heard the long-drawn breath of relief and exultation, the murmured, "Thank God!" followed after a brief pause by a question whispered in her ear:

"Then there is hope for me?"

She only bent her head mutely in assent, and without another word he passed his arm round her waist and whirled her out into the middle of the room.

In that delightful never-to-be-forgotten waltz, was it indeed all Helen's fancy that Nugent held her to him more closely and tenderly than before, that his eyes flashed with an unwonted passion into hers, and that there was in his whole being an in-

tensity of exultant though suppressed excitement, of which she could not misunderstand the cause?

And yet, all the time—above the delirious throbings of her own heart, above the siren strains of the dance music—a voice deep down within her seemed to say:

"Enjoy yourself whilst you may, you poor fool!—it will not last—it is but a stolen joy to which you have no right—a false and unreal happiness which an avenging Nemesis will soon snatch away from you for ever."

Even the music seemed after a while only to be an echo of the warning words, so that with every throb of the tune, she seemed to hear over and over again:

"It will not last!—it will not last!"

Nothing lasts. The waltz came, as a matter of course, to an end, and just as Nugent deposited his breathless partner upon a low couch at the end of the room, he looked up and beheld Mrs. Torrington entering the door at the further side of it.

Her quick eyes saw him in a moment—there was a flash of anger, of disapproval, in them which Nugent, who knew every look in her face too well, was able to understand with perfect accuracy. A shadow came over his face, all the light went out of it—he rose hastily and offered his arm to Helen, murmured something about finding Lady Camilla.

"I expect it is time to go, she will be looking for her party," he explained as they walked across the wide and nearly empty ball-room. "Everything," he added with a little half-awkward laugh, "everything, you know, comes to an end."

'Yes, everything comes to an end,' repeated Helen dully and lifelessly—and somehow all at once all the brightness and beauty about her seemed to become extinguished.

Lady Camilla came forward to tell her she was going home. Lord Bainton tucked her hand under

his arm to take her to the cloak-room ; she submitted listlessly to be carried away What did it matter ? It was all over ! The ball, and the little success she had had, and everything else—it was over !

Five minutes later Gilbert Nugent was wrapping a large fur-lined plush mantle round Dora Torrington's white shoulders.

"You were quite wrong," he whispered to her. "Miss Dacre is not as you imagine engaged to that young man of inferior aspect."

"Is she not ?" replied the widow with a languid smile. "I wonder then why she writes to him twice a week !"

Presumably Nugent was left to wonder too !

CHAPTER XV

MR. WARNE RECEIVES A BLOW.

"There mark what ills a scholar's life assail—
Toil, envy, want."

—SAM JOHNSON.

"AT last !" exclaimed Mr. Frederick Warne aloud to himself as he entered his shabby little sitting-room from the bed-room door beyond and examined the letters that lay on the table by the side of his breakfast-tray.

His landlady had just brought in his morning repast. It did not look very tempting. On the battered black japanned tray, that was guiltless of the luxury of a table-napkin, stood a metal tea-pot, a cup and saucer of coarse ware, a large slop basin filled with sugar, and a small milk jug containing a bluish liquid. Between two plates reposed a few slices of greasily-cooked bacon, whilst a flabby cottage loaf and a pat of pale and unwholesome-looking butter completed the arrange-

ments. Mr. Warne, probably because he knew no better, did not seem dissatisfied with the fare ; he sat down to the table, poured himself out a cup of bitter-flavoured tea and took a mouthful or two of the greasy bacon before turning once more to his letters, and then, with a gleam of evident satisfaction in his eyes, he selected one from the rest and broke open the envelope.

"Time she did write," he murmured as he extracted the letter—a short one apparently, for the outer sheet was blank. "Three letters of mine and no answer ! It is a most reprehensible habit of Helen's that of leaving letters unanswered ; however, doubtless she is now penitent," and then he proceeded to read the epistle.

It was quite short, and not in the least what Mr. Warne expected.

"DEAR FREDERICK,—I am writing to ask you to release me from my engagement to you. I find that I do not love you sufficiently to become your wife. I am sure you will agree with me that under these circumstances we should not be happy together. Pray write by return of post and give me back my promise, and also send back to me some letters of mine which you have. Always your sincere friend,

"HELEN DACRE."

As Mr. Warne read this brief and explicit document his jaw fell, and a look of consternation that was almost comic overspread his countenance.

For some months past he had been dwelling with considerable satisfaction upon the fact that he was engaged to be married to a lady with thirty thousand pounds of her own. His new appointment was comfortable enough—it might perhaps have satisfied his aspirations in the old days when he had looked for nothing better, but new hopes

and ambitions had lately arisen in the young man's breast, and the Classical Professorship at the Girls' High school, with the free lodging thrown in, no longer contented him.

For what might he not do with thirty thousand pounds? He could found and build a school of his own—a school upon a particular pattern of his own fancy which he had long had in his mind. The education should be cheap but sound—there should be resident pupils and day boarders—the latter might be expected to flock in in almost limitless numbers. He would have one wing of the building, to be erected with Helen's money, devoted to classical studies, the other to mathematics, modern languages, and science. There should be nothing frivolous taught. It should be a training school for earnest-minded young women of the middle classes. There must be thousands of such young women waiting and longing to be so trained. Nothing should be spared to make the programme attractive. The professors should be men of learning and distinction, the lady principal a woman of high attainments. There should be scholarships to Girton and Newnham, and certificates of first and second class merit. There should be a lecture hall, and a debating society. The prospectus should set forth all this in flowing language and, with such a sum as thirty thousand pounds at his back, the thing was bound to be a gigantic success, whilst he himself as Head and Principal of the School would reign supreme and at the same time gather in the profits rapidly and satisfactorily.

These had been his dreams—no more, no less. To raise himself above the beaten path of educational work presented no attraction to him. His sluggish soul conceived no higher joy than to be the big man of his own establishment in his own accustomed line of life. To teach, to admonish, to

lay down laws for everybody else was the very breath of his being. He could not have existed without it, and thus his day-dreams included no scheme for his own luxury or enjoyment; only this practical and thoroughly prosaic ambition, to remain a schoolmaster still, on a broader and more lucrative basis. In his own way he was fond of Helen, but as to the part which she was to play in his future he troubled himself very little. It was her money which was so necessary to him. She would of course be a presentable and creditable wife, and her attitude of reverent and submissive adoration of her husband would be no doubt of infinite benefit to her and of much comfort to himself. He dismissed her thus very briefly from his mind. What he could not dismiss was the present difficulty, which barred the way to the initial step of his future career, so that he was at the very outset powerless to advance.

When he had read Helen's note three or four times over he came to the conclusion that she was the victim of evil influences. Lord Bainton was evidently his enemy, the man's insolence to himself had been marked. Why should he, Frederick Warne, a superior and learned man, in a responsible position in life, be treated with such contumely by an overbearing member of the aristocracy?

"Why, pray, am I not good enough for Helen Dacre?" he asked of himself aloud with virtuous indignation. It seemed to him indeed that he was more than good enough. The advantages—bar that little matter of the money—were entirely on her side. She was young, unformed, girlish and ignorant in many ways, whilst he was a man of erudition and experience. If anything the balance was all in her favour; a union with him would be an inestimable advantage to her. She was indeed but little fitted to mate with a man so infinitely her superior in mental acquirements. Moreover, as

to that money, who could say that his motives were mercenary? He had been willing to marry her when she had only forty pounds a year, was it not fair and right that he should marry her now? Lord Bainton, in the days of her poverty, had taken no notice of her whatever; who was he, that he should come now between her and her betrothed husband?

The more he thought about it, the more clear it became to him that he possessed an unalterable right to possess himself of that thirty thousand pounds, and to devote it forthwith to his own excellent and admirable project.

He rose when he had finished his breakfast and went and stood at his window. It was a third-floor window and looked out on to the court-yard of the High School. Across the open space, in twos and threes, in groups and singly, the girl students were hurrying to take their places for the morning's lecture. He himself was to give the lecture, a lecture upon Greek literature; his subject was all prepared, his notes lay ready on the table behind him. He looked forward to his task with pleasure and a certain sense of importance. He liked lecturing to girls. The sea of fair young faces reverently and silently turned up to his own, pandered to his vanity and soothed his sense of unappreciated superiority.

He told himself that he possessed the talent, why then should he not have the money which would give him the power and the influence as well?

It was his by right. Helen should not upset all these important schemes for his future for the mere perversity of a childish caprice!

It was a Wednesday, a half holiday. When his morning duties were over he was due at Aberdare House to teach Latin grammar to the big girls at his aunt's school. He did not like teaching them nearly so well as the middle-class young ladies.

These well-born damsels had a careless way of receiving his instructions which annoyed him. Sometimes he even fancied they turned him into ridicule, and on one terrible occasion he had found upon the floor, after the class had retired, a horrible pen-and-ink sketch, which he feared, he very sadly feared, might be intended for his august self.

It represented a very ugly man in a flowing beard and spectacles, with sundry other facial peculiarities that were not altogether unfamiliar to him, and beneath the portrait was written "Ugly old Snuff-bags in his gig-lamps."

Frederick, with a wisdom beyond his years, put the hateful caricature quickly into the fire, and said nothing about it to anybody, but it burnt in his memory very much longer than it burnt in the grate, and it added a certain acrimony to his lessons at Aberdare House ever after.

When he got to Cleares Common to-day, contrary to his usual habit, he went first into his aunt's study instead of going at once to the classroom.

Miss Fairbrother was dozing gently in her arm-chair. She dozed a great deal now, more than she used to do when the dark-eyed pupil teacher, whom she had brought up from a child, was living with her. The work of the school was in no way neglected, because she had competent teachers to look after the young ladies, but beyond overlooking a few examination papers, and reading daily prayers and presiding at meals, she did very little herself now.

When her nephew came in she roused herself, and pretended that she was reading the book on the Chemical Properties of Herbaceous Plants, which, for precaution's sake, she had laid open upon her knee before she went to sleep. Miss Fairbrother always liked it to be supposed that she read works of an instructive nature when she was

in the seclusion of her study, and in case any of the governesses or girls came in unexpectedly, it was always as well to be provided with a volume of a serious character.

She clutched at the book when she heard the door open behind her, but on perceiving her nephew, laid it aside again, and welcomed him with a smile. He sat himself down with a serious aspect by her side and took Helen Dacre's note out of his pocket.

"I have received this morning a letter, my dear aunt, which has annoyed me extremely, and which I must request you to read and give me your advice upon."

Miss Fairbrother took the letter from his hand and read it.

"It is infamous!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "It is dishonourable—unwomanly! Can this be the girl I brought up so carefully and judiciously? Oh! my dear Frederick, she is unworthy of you."

"I greatly fear so, aunt," replied Warne, modestly. "I greatly fear it. I would not indeed waste another thought upon this poor misguided child, but"—and here his eyes and Miss Fairbrother's suddenly met—"there are other considerations——"

The look of mutual comprehension lasted but a second—the "considerations" were not put into actual words—there would perhaps have been a lack of delicacy in doing so, but it is quite certain that they understood one another. Miss Fairbrother nodded her head several times.

"Yes, yes," she murmured with a feeling sigh. "My poor boy, you have your rights—your undoubted rights."

"It is exactly what I feel, my dear aunt. But how am I to enforce those rights?"

There was a moment of silence. Miss Fairbrother suggested nothing, and presently Frederick spoke again.

"This poor child has been drawn into the vortex of the world—the pleasures and dissipations of a frivolous Society have turned her head, and enticed her away from those nobler aspirations of her girlhood implanted by your tuition. I feel that she ought to be rescued——"

"Like a brand from the burning," murmured Miss Fairbrother, nodding her head once more. But how the brand was to be rescued it was somewhat difficult to say. "You will of course not release her from her promises?"

"Of course not."

"Nor return her letters?"

"Decidedly not."

"Is there—is there anything in any of them, my dear boy, that might—might——?"

"Yes," very promptly, "I have a letter of hers in which she makes use of the words 'our marriage,' and goes on to say further on, 'when I am your wife.' It was in the first week of our engagement."

"Ah! that is good—decidedly good."

"You are thinking of a breach of promise, aunt?"

"I think you might with advantage hold such a contingency over her," admitted Miss Fairbrother. "Do not give her back her letters."

"I will not, aunt. I never intended to do so." He rose to go to his work, but at this moment the neat parlourmaid entered, bearing the second post letters on a tray.

Frederick had already reached the door, when Miss Fairbrother called him back.

There was a look of excitement on her face, her hands, which held an open letter, trembled, and her old eyes shot quick glances at her nephew. She motioned to the parlourmaid, who lingered to replenish the fire, to leave the room.

As soon as she was alone with him, she cried breathlessly:

"Here is the finger of Providence, Frederick! Something wonderful, astonishing. You came to me for advice, and now this totally unexpected letter has been put into my hands in order that I may guide and advise you—listen."

"MADAM,—You have I believe a nephew named Mr. Frederick Warne. If he is in any way interested in the future of Miss Helen Dacre, advise him to come at once to the neighbourhood where she is now residing. If he does not enforce his claims I warn him that *another* will supplant him and carry away the prize that might easily be his.
"AN UNKNOWN FRIEND."

Miss Fairbrother read this communication aloud from the first word to the last, and then a dead silence fell upon the two, and they looked at one another without a word.

"An anonymous letter!" murmured Warne at length, below his breath, with rather a shocked air. Such a thing had never come across the respectable experiences of his life before.

Miss Fairbrother turned the letter over and over again in a puzzled manner.

"What is the post-mark?"

"It is a London post-mark," she answered. "That tells one nothing."

"And you cannot make a guess at the handwriting?"

"The old lady shook her head. "You see it says a 'friend'—it is meant well—in fact, as I said, it is providential. You must act upon it, Frederick."

"You think so, aunt?" He was a little doubtful—a lingering of good taste and good feeling seemed to knock at the portals of that small and shrunken receptacle where he kept his conscience, and to warn him against that snake-like letter.

"I have heard—I have been told—that it is better not to notice anonymous communications—that they should be burnt," he said doubtfully.

"Don't be a fool, Frederick," replied his aunt tartly, as she folded up the missive and put it safely away in her reticule. "I am not going to burn the letter, and you are going down to Meadowshire to-morrow. You'll lose that money if you don't as sure as I sit here."

This argument was bound to prevail.

"Who can 'another' mean?" was Frederick's only rejoinder.

"Go and see. But it is probably the Earl of Bainton himself."

Frederick uplifted his hands and eyes in holy horror.

"The pharisaical old reprobate!" he exclaimed. "What wickedness there is in the world!" And then he went his way to teach Valpy's Latin Exercises to the young ladies in the next room.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SECRET ALLIANCE.

"In this fool's Paradise she drank delight."

—CRABBE.

"L'UNION fait la force," says the French proverb, and call it by what name you will, combination, coalition, or collaboration, there is not a doubt of it that two heads are better than one, and that a partnership in any cause, either good or bad, is the best way to set to work to make that cause succeed.

The idea had suggested itself very strongly to Mrs. Torrington on the morning after the Hunt Ball. It was not the least use in the world, she reflected, to make an enemy of Lady Camilla—a

quarrel with her cousin and hostess would not help her in the very least, and would, in point of fact, be extremely unpleasant in its consequences, for a great deal of the pleasure and profit of her existence accrued to her from her long periodical visits to Oldpark, and she had no desire whatever to quarrel with her bread and butter.

So she determined to join forces with Lady Camilla in order to fight the common enemy together.

Helen Dacre must be got rid of. She could not, it is true, be poisoned, or shut up in a dungeon, or done away with by any of the mediæval methods common to melodrama, but she might not impossibly be sent back with disgrace to that humble position of life out of which she had been so unfortunately lifted, and there left to languish in well-merited obscurity.

Mrs. Torrington remembered the young man with the horrible hat and boots, and the unexplained mystery that had surrounded his appearance, and went and knocked at Lady Camilla's door.

The conference lasted for some time.

Dora explained to her cousin satisfactorily that the same object actuated them both, namely, the total obliteration of Helen Dacre from the scene of her present evil doings.

"I don't want her to marry Gilbert Nugent, and you don't want her to marry your brother," she said.

"If she doesn't marry the one, it seems to me that she must marry the other," said her ladyship despondingly.

"Not at all, my dear Camilla, not at all! There is a third alternative open to her—she can marry somebody else."

"Somebody else!—and where are we to find that somebody else, pray? *Two* lovers are certainly enough for the girl—where are we to find a third?"

"He is found already."

"You don't mean it—really? How do you know?"

"I found him," replied Dora, with the calm assurance of a secure position. And then she proceeded to tell Lady Camilla all about the inferior-looking young man in the ill-made clothes whom she herself had encountered at the door, and of how Helen had turned pale and red at the sight of the card which he had left for her, although she had stated that he was nothing but the nephew of her schoolmistress.

"But it's my conviction," she added sapiently, "that she is engaged, if not actually married, to the creature, for I am almost certain he writes to her frequently. She looks so guilty about it, too. Well, then, of course, Gilbert must needs take a lively interest in the matter."

"Ah! he is in love with her, as I told you before," Lady Camilla could not help saying.

"Nothing of the sort," replied the widow with asperity. "It is Bainton who is in love with her. Gilbert only wants her money."

"Well, we won't quarrel about it, my dear, go on."

And the little passage of arms being over, Dora proceeded with her tale.

"Gilbert—like the silly fool he is—spoke to me about it; asked me if I thought Helen Dacre was engaged to be married to some one she had known in her former life? Not satisfied with what I told him, it appears that he asked her himself at the ball last night, and he informed me quite triumphantly that there was no truth in it, and that she had denied all connection with the man. It's my belief she told him a lie, and that is what I mean to find out. Will you help me, Camilla?"

"I don't see how we are to discover."

"Don't you? Well, I think I do. Listen to me."

And then the ladies fell into conversation of so earnest and private a nature that it is scarcely possible to follow the thread of it in all its windings. Pens and ink were brought into requisition after a time, and a great deal of whispering and consulting went on over the writing-table, besides the wholesale destruction of a great many sheets of Lady Camilla's best writing-paper.

To make a long story short, the result of the confabulation was, the Anonymous Letter!

It was by Lady Camilla's advice that this precious document was addressed to Miss Fairbrother, and not to her nephew. To begin with, there was a security about the old lady's direction, which was well known to her old pupil, whereas the dwelling-place of her nephew—if, indeed, he was her nephew, seemed to be shrouded in vague uncertainty. If there was no nephew, no harm would be done, if the nephew existed he would be quite certain to see the letter.

The caligraphy was undertaken entirely by Mrs. Torrington. She had a pretty little talent for feigning divers styles of handwriting, and she exercised it with great dexterity on the present occasion. It was, in fact, quite impossible to guess, from the internal evidence of it, whether the letter was written by a man or by a woman. When it was finished off to the satisfaction of both the fair conspirators, it was sent under cover to an intimate friend of Dora Torrington's, who lived in London, with a request that it might be dropped into the nearest pillar-box at the earliest opportunity.

After which the two ladies kissed each other with great effusion, and the new alliance was cemented by many words of endearment and affection on either side.

Meanwhile, all unconscious of the web which her enemies were weaving for her discomfiture, Helen Dacre, mounted on Sunflower, was riding slowly

homewards through the winding lanes; she had somehow missed the hounds to-day, and had got thrown out of the run, and so being a little tired with her last night's ball, and a little more inclined perhaps for dreaming than for action, she had decided upon riding home by herself.

The girl was quite happy—a little smile hovered over her lips, and a warm glow, the reflex of something soft and tender at her heart, shone in the depths of her dark and speaking eyes.

She knew of no reason why she should not be happy; the world she had come to live in was very fair to her; she seemed to possess everything that it could give her—pleasure, luxury and kind friends; and now—last, best gift of all—love itself was hers! Wherever she turned smiles and flattering words met her—everybody was kind to her. She knew of course, that it was her money that had done all this—but then there was no bitterness in that knowledge, for oh! what a lovely world of affection and sympathy had that magical golden key not opened to her!

The little barricade which in her girlish foolishness she had built up against the man she loved was all broken down now; how glad she was that this was so. Whatever she had felt of rage and anger against him at the first, she knew quite well now must have all melted away into love and pity in that hour when he had lain helpless and unconscious, stretched upon the sodden earth at her feet. From that hour no doubt pride had died and love had sprung up into life in its stead. And now, although she recognised perfectly that there lay a whole wilderness of doubts and fears and difficulties between her and him; yet across that gulf he had reached out his longing hands to her, and it seemed to her that in time all would be overcome—all perils vanish away—and he and she whose hearts had cried out in the darkness to one

another, would be made one at last, in the triumph of a full and cloudless sunshine.

It was the happy dream of a young girl. She asked herself neither the ways nor the means—all that should be left to him—she would be patient; she would trust in him and wait for him.

She had done her part quickly and promptly—she had employed her first waking moments in writing a few brief lines to that other man whom she could not even think of without shame and contrition. She had done all she could to undo the lie she had spoken last night—the lie had become the truth, and she was nothing now to Frederick Warne—nothing! That lie already lay on her conscience no longer. The only thing that troubled her was Dora Torrington, Dora, who believed in him, who had bound herself to him; but for the certain and instinctive knowledge that Mrs. Torrington was unworthy of him, Helen would have been miserable to think that Nugent had been false to the little widow for her sake; even as it was she was vaguely uneasy.

But she consoled herself by reflecting that no doubt that it was a one-sided affair, and that Dora was an undesirable wife for such a one as Gilbert Nugent. Still he must have loved her once!

Alas, that love should fade and alter and die! It seemed to her very sad, but perhaps it was unavoidable. Lady Camilla had told her that men were changeable, and he had let her see how irksome was his position with regard to Dora, and had appealed to her—Helen Dacre—to free him from it.

A woman forgives much to a man if only he loves her; his love for herself excuses him in her eyes for his perfidy to another; for a man's falseness or fickleness is never wholly odious to the woman for whose sake he is false or fickle.

As she rode slowly along, full of happy fancies

and of sweet, intangible dreams of all that the future might bring to her, a horseman came into view far away along the narrow lane behind her. No sooner had he caught sight of the well-groomed chesnut horse and his graceful rider, than, putting his own horse into a sharp trot, he rode up quickly and overtook her.

She turned round at the sound of the advancing steps, and waved her hand gaily as she recognised her guardian.

"Riding homewards, my dear Helen! how is this?" he exclaimed as he reached her side.

"I lost the hounds somehow. I was on the wrong side of the covert when the fox broke, and somehow I went the wrong way and could not catch them up," explained Helen.

"You want someone to take care of you in the hunting-field, you have not enough experience to be so independent; why did you not follow me?"

"I miss Ted horribly," she answered, ignoring his last question, at which she smiled inwardly, for Lord Bainton, although he had been a fine horseman in his day, had grown somewhat heavy, and his cautious career across country, through gaps and gates, and by circuitous courses along the roads, would not at all have commended itself to the adventurous spirit of his young ward.

"Oh, Ted is a scatter-brain young monkey! You want somebody steadier than Ted to look after you."

Helen made no answer for some minutes. They rode along in silence together between the wet and straggling hedgerows, that glittered in the winter sun, on either side.

"Your rashness makes me very anxious," said the earl presently. "You are fool-hardy, my dear, because you are ignorant of the dangers you run."

"I will be more careful, dear Lord Bainton."

There was another pause, then Lord Bainton said rather suddenly :

"I am going away this afternoon. I am obliged to be in London—there is a law-suit concerning one of my tenants in which I am mixed up. I must leave you here, of course, with my sister, as we arranged, but before I go I want to say something to you."

"Yes?" she said, but with a languid interest. No doubt he wished to enjoin more prudence upon her.

"You need not give me an answer at all—in fact, I don't want an answer now. I had rather you took your time and thought it over."

She perceived with surprise that he spoke with nervousness. Was it something about her money? Had she been extravagant?

"I wish," he blurted out, "I wish you to be my wife!"

"Oh, Lord Bainton!"

"Pray say nothing. I do not require an answer. Any time within six months you can tell me. Don't speak now. "Good-bye." He pressed his heels into his horse, who sprang forward at a brisk canter, and in three minutes he had disappeared round a turn of the road.

CHAPTER XVII.

DORA'S SONG.

"Think nought a trifle, though it small appear
Small sands the mountain, moments make the year,
And trifles life."

—YOUNG.

IF a thunderbolt had rent the skies and fallen at her feet, Helen could not have been more astounded, or indeed more horrified, than by Lord Bainton's extraordinary and totally unexpected words.

For the first few seconds she felt positively stunned, but after a minute or two she began to realise her position, and it overwhelmed her with a great bitterness of disappointment.

She had learnt to love Lord Bainton as a father. To the orphan girl, whose recollection of her own parents was no more than a dim memory of a distant childhood, the tender and protecting care of this kind and polished elderly gentleman had been unspeakably precious. It had seemed to her that he had been expressly sent, in the time of her sorest need and loneliness, to take the place of her own dead father, and to supply all those sweet ties of family and home from which she had been for ever shut out. Her gratitude to him was unbounded ; her reverence and respect without limit ; and her love for him was of a sweet and filial nature, such as a daughter would have experienced.

Now all these happy delusions were shattered at a single blow. The charming peace and security of her relations with him were utterly destroyed, and all the confidence and trust she had placed in him rudely and cruelly shaken.

It was a moral shock to her.

A sense of disgust with him, with herself, with life itself, overpowered her. The almost sacred nature of the affection she had entertained for him, and which she had believed him to return towards her, seemed all at once to be degraded and vulgarised. She had looked up to him as a child, and he, a man old enough to have been in truth her grandfather, desired to marry her ! The bare thought of such a union—of his sixty years against her twenty—of this veritable “ May and December ”—filled her with unspeakable loathing and repulsion. She almost hated him—it was worse—oh, a million times worse even than Frederick Warne !

When she found herself at a later hour sitting opposite to him at the luncheon table, she could

not bear to speak to him or even to meet his eyes. A sense of shame and disgrace seemed to oppress her—shame for him that he should have fallen from the pedestal upon which she had placed him, and disgrace to herself that she should be the object of aspirations so unworthy of him.

Her confusion and embarrassment were, however, in no way shared by her guardian. He chatted and talked with his usual spirits, without in any way seeming to notice his ward's averted looks and constrained manner.

The three ladies were his only companions at the lunch table. Mr. Greyson and Nugent, more fortunate or more persevering than Helen, had kept up with the hounds, and were now enjoying an excellent run across a fine bit of country after a second fox that had been started later in the day.

The brougham had been ordered at three o'clock to take the Earl to the station, where his friends had undertaken that his luggage should meet him. When he had finished a somewhat hasty lunch, he excused himself to his sister and rose abruptly from the table.

"I must go and see about the gun-case I left here, Camilla," he remarked, as he left the dining-room, "and there's a whip of mine too somewhere."

The door closed behind him, and instantly and without a word Helen rose from her place and followed him out of the room.

Lady Camilla and Dora remained staring speechlessly at one another.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the widow.

Lady Camilla was white with anger and fear.

"Bold, brazen girl!" she ejaculated. "What does she do that for! Oh, Dora, you don't think, do you, that we are too late, and that she has already got hold of him? What shall I do? Shall I follow her?"

"Not for the world. Sit still—pretend not to

notice her. If she is engaged to him we can do nothing yet—we must wait till he has gone away. Don't awaken his suspicions by seeming to watch him."

"It is terrible!" gasped Lady Camilla. "My poor deluded brother!"

"Deluded fiddlesticks!" ejaculated Mrs. Torrington irreverently. "Bainton is old enough to take care of himself."

"And you advise me then to sit by and see this iniquity perpetrated?" cried her cousin excitedly.

"I advise you nothing of the sort, my dear. Take my word for it, your brother has not committed himself yet. Old men are cautious, they do not rush into matrimonial engagements in a hurry, they have to weigh all the pros and cons first, to see if it will be to their advantage or disadvantage to take a wife. You may depend upon it that Bainton will have to consult his lawyer, his physician, possibly even his cook, before making up his mind that it will be desirable and comfortable to himself to change his manner of life—there is plenty of time!"

"Then why has she rushed out in that impetuous way?"

"Because girls never understand how to manage a man. They either chill him with too much reserve or bore him with too much effusion. Our young friend rushes apparently from one extreme to the other!"

Meanwhile Lord Bainton and Helen were standing face to face outside the hall.

"My dear, I don't want you to say anything at all," the Earl was repeating with gentle insistence.

"I must speak—I cannot let you go without speaking. I *must* tell you that what you have said to me is impossible."

Bainton shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Nothing is impossible, my dear child."

"Yes—yes," she persisted breathlessly, "this thing is quite, quite impossible. Oh! why, why did you spoil everything by saying it!" She wrung her hands together and there were tears in her eyes as she turned her head away from him.

"Pray do not distress yourself, Helen," he said kindly, taking her hands into his. "You are surprised, and a little upset I daresay now—it has been rather sudden for you my dear child; but believe me you will get accustomed to the idea very soon. Only don't let it trouble you—you see there is no hurry at all. Now promise me just to put it out of your mind for the present!"

"I cannot, I cannot! it is right to you that I should tell you at once that I can never be your wife——"

"No, you must tell me nothing of the sort, you have not yet thought it over, and I do not want any answer from you for a long time. 'Never' is a long day, my dear child, and we can none of us foretell how soon circumstances may effect a change in our wishes."

Afterwards Helen had cause to remember those words of Lord Bainton's—they were destined to come back to her mind almost with the force of a prophecy.

Just now she was too much distressed and upset to pay much attention to them, she only did what a woman often does when she is hard driven and perplexed, she burst into tears.

Her guardian laid his hand with a fatherly tenderness upon her shoulder.

"My dear little girl, do not be unhappy. Believe me I only desire to do everything in the world to please you. I am very fond of you, Helen, and I think that the safest solution to the problems and difficulties of your position will be to do as I have suggested. But I do not wish you to be worried or troubled, I only ask you to think it over, that

commits you to nothing at all, you know; only remember that I shall not change, and that at any moment I shall be as I am now, entirely and wholly at your feet and at your service."

The men-servants were coming into the hall from the back premises with the Earl's gun-case and a bundle of rugs, and the brougham was at the door—there was no further opportunity for private conversation, even if at that moment the two ladies had not entered from the dining-room.

Helen was still brushing away her tears, and Lady Camilla threw a quick glance of keen suspicion at her.

"Crying!" she thought angrily, "now I wonder what on earth that is for! I've no patience with the girl's sly ways! and my brother, who is always such a fool about a woman's tears!"

Five minutes later the good-byes had been spoken and Lord Bainton was gone, and Helen as she watched the brougham disappear down the avenue and turned away wearily from the window, could not help thinking that in spite of the madness and folly of his desiring to become her husband, he was perhaps her best and truest friend, and that his presence afforded her a strength and protection which in his absence she sorely needed.

The events of the next few days acted one upon the other with a singular coherence. Circumstances, partly accidental and partly preconcerted, played upon each other with an extraordinary fatality.

After Lord Bainton's departure to London, the next thing which happened at Oldpark was of so trivial a nature as to appear entirely unimportant, and yet it was by no means so.

When the gentlemen came back from hunting, late in the afternoon, Nugent asked his hostess' permission to absent himself for two days from her house. He had received an invitation from some friends at the further side of the county, there was

to be a big shoot, a wholesale slaughter of pheasants, and, as an undeniable shot, Nugent's gun was much in demand on these occasions.

"I shall not be back till after dinner or the day after to-morrow," he explained, "and the next day, Lady Camilla, I fear that I must bring my delightful visit to you to a close."

Mrs. Torrington turned a quick glance upon him at these words, whilst Helen, who was again unravelling some mistakes in Lady Camilla's "poor work," bent her head more completely over her task.

"Are you certain that you are strong enough to leave us yet, Gilbert?" inquired Lady Camilla kindly.

"Yes, I am perfectly well again now, thanks to your kind care; and I have two engagements in Yorkshire which I have put off too long, and which I must now go and fulfil."

Dora rose to go to the piano, making a signal to him to follow her.

"How can you be so unkind as to go away?" she murmured to him reproachfully whilst he was arranging her music for her upon the desk.

"My dear girl," he began awkwardly, "I really must go sometimes and see my friends."

"Where are you going? Can I not get invited to the houses you are to stay in?"

"I am going first to the Delastairs'," he said, not without a shade of malice, for Mrs. Delastairs was one of those exceedingly particular leaders of Society who "draw the line" at lively widows who render themselves conspicuous by their flirtations. Mrs. Delastair moreover had distinctly declined the honour of Mrs. Torrington's acquaintance, and Mrs. Torrington was aware of it.

She made a movement of impatience and annoyance.

"That horrid woman! How can you go and

stay in her house when you know how rude she has been to me ? ”

“ Delastair has the best pheasant shooting in Yorkshire.”

“ How like a man that is ! I believe you would swallow any insult for the sake of a day’s good shooting.”

“ I hope not. Neither Delastair nor his wife have ever insulted me ; and don’t you think, my dear Dora, that it would be somewhat compromising to you if I were to constitute myself the champion of your quarrels ? ”

“ You are selfish and cruel,” she retorted angrily.

“ Do sing ‘ The Falling Leaves,’ ” selecting a song from a pile of music on the piano. “ It suits your voice so well.” He opened it and propped it up against the music desk, ignoring completely her accusations.

Dora was flattered. Gilbert, in the old days of his early passion, had been fond of her singing, and had often hung entranced by the hour together over her piano, but of late years he had seemed to take very little interest in her vocal performances ; perhaps her voice was less true and sweet than of yore, or perhaps it was only because the singer was less attractive to him that her songs failed to please or soothe him. When he asked her now to sing, she was mollified—it was like old times, and surely—surely it showed that she had not altogether lost her power over him. She shot a swift smile up at his handsome face and began to sing.

But the heart of man is said to be deceitful above all things, and certainly never was its duplicity more clearly indicated than on this occasion. The piano was a “ cottage ” one, and naturally it stood against the wall, so that the singer’s back was turned towards the room.

Dora’s little piping voice was soon well under weigh in the somewhat melancholy refrain of a

song which repeated its inanities with an irritating reiteration :

“ The leaves are falling—falling,
And my heart is breaking ;
Whilst a voice is calling—calling,
And my soul is waking—
Whilst the leaves are falling—falling—falling.”

They were falling incessantly, and whilst the dirge-like ditty spun itself out, a little serio-comedy was enacted behind the singer's unconscious back.

Under cover of some heavy bass chords which accompanied the fall of those leaves and the fracture of that depressed heart, Nugent stole softly across the thick velvet pile carpet to the slender figure seated at the table in the centre of the room. Lady Camilla noted the retrograde movement from her corner, and with an internal chuckle kept her eyes discreetly fixed upon her newspaper.

“ I may as well see nothing,” she thought. “ Dora would play *me* false in a minute if it suited her, and if her plan of salvation fails—I may as well have another iron in the fire.”

Nugent bent low over the back of Helen's chair.

“ I must speak to you,” he whispered in her ear. She lifted her head with a startled expression, and a wave of colour flooded her cheeks—his face was within a few inches of her own—his eyes, passion-laden, poured their love and longing into hers—it was impossible to mistake his meaning. Her eyelids fell and she trembled slightly.

“ I have to start early to-morrow morning—at eight o'clock. Will you see me before I start?”

“ Yes.”

“ At half-past seven in the library?”

Again her lips framed a voiceless “ Yes,” and in another second he was back again at the cottage

piano murmuring a faint "Brava, brava!" as the last of the falling leaves fell definitely away into the final cadences of Dora's Torrington's song.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GOOD-BYE.

"To love—and then to part."

—COLERIDGE.

A LOVE tryst at half-past seven o'clock on a cold January morning, in a fireless room, does not hold out to the minds of sane and sober persons any element of a purely romantic nature, but to the follies of lovers there is no end, and in order to secure the bliss of an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* there is no discomfort and no inconvenience on the face of the earth to which they will not cheerfully and eagerly submit.

It was, therefore, with praiseworthy punctuality that, at half-past seven o'clock on the following morning, Nugent and Helen Dacre found themselves together in the large and empty library.

The fire was as yet unlighted, the grate being still filled with yesterday's ashes; the chairs were pushed out of their places, books and newspapers lay in disorder about the tables—in fact it was evident that the housemaid had not yet entered the room on her morning rounds.

Nugent, who was the first to appear, himself opened the shutters and threw back the heavy window curtains, so that the pale light of a frosty morning crept cheerlessly and dimly into the room from the glazed verandah without.

Helen came in timidly—she was very pale, and seemed nervous and frightened. Gilbert went forward eagerly to meet her.

"How good of you to get up! How can I

thank you enough?" he murmured, as he grasped her hand.

"Please be quick," she whispered, looking round nervously. "I am afraid someone may find us here—the servants——"

"Never mind the servants—if they come in it can't be helped. Helen, don't you know—cannot you guess what I have to say to you?"

Her colour rose and her head drooped; he took the sweet shy face between both his hands and lifted it up.

"Darling, I love you," he whispered, "I love you with all my soul—I want you for my own. When I have freed myself, when I have shaken off this intolerable yoke that is my shame and disgrace, will you forgive me my unworthy past, and be my wife?"

He drew her close to his heart, so that her head lay against his breast. She made neither answer nor resistance—but the gentle pressure of her yielding form, as she leant upon him, told him without any need of words that her heart was his own.

"I wanted to tell you this before I went away," he continued; "to explain to you how impossible it is to me to continue in this house and in the false position I hold here any longer. I have accepted this invitation to-day solely that I may not remain here any longer. I could not, unfortunately, go to Yorkshire until the day after to-morrow. I must return here to-morrow night, but I shall only be here for that one night and leave again on the following morning. It is very unlikely that I shall get a word with you then; but when I am in Yorkshire I am going to write to her and put an end to this horrible slavery—it will be easier for me to write than to speak—and then, after a few weeks, dearest, I will go to London and lay my case before your guardian, and plead

for the dear hand that I covet for my own. Meanwhile, will you trust me?"

He bent and kissed her forehead gently and reverently, with infinite worship and tenderness.

"You are so good and so true," he whispered, "so immeasurably too good for such a man as I am!"

"Oh, don't say that," she found voice to answer; "you don't know—indeed, indeed, I am not good!"

"Ah, you must allow me to be the judge of that!" he said, with a smile. "I have not a shadow of doubt of you! You are truth itself—you could not be false or deceitful; those beautiful eyes of yours never looked an untrue look, and those sweet lips are incapable of uttering a lie!"

She trembled and shrank in his arms—a deathly pallor chased her blushes away; she hid her face from his gaze upon his arm. Why, oh why did he strike her to the heart with those terrible words of praise?

The lie that she had spoken to him stood out in letters of flame before her! For one wild moment she strove to find her voice—to speak—to confess the truth to tell him that she had deceived him. If he had only seen her agitation and questioned her! But he saw nothing—and her voice failed and her parched lips refused to utter the words which should debase her for ever in his eyes. And then swiftly she told herself, with that sophistry with which we all make excuses for our mean and bad actions, that, after all, the lie was a lie no longer—that she had made amends for it, and that by this very morning's post she expected the letter which was to set her free from the hateful error of her past. What need was there then that she should confess to him that closed chapter of her girlish mistake?

She could tell him nothing. Only as in a dream she heard him repeat over again his unbounded

belief in her—his faith in the saving influence which was to renovate and purify his whole life. She heard him call her his guardian angel, his sweet saint of the blameless heart—his true love, who was to crown his life with joy and gladness.

Once or twice she tried feebly and vainly to stem the flow of those undeserved encomiums, but her faint denials only seemed to him to be the outcome of her modesty and humility, and he scarcely listened to them, or heard the low and trembling words.

After all, too, the time was very short. A bell in the hall rang for his early breakfast, warning him that he had not another moment to spare, and a footstep along the passage outside caused Helen to start away guiltily from his arms and to fly like a frightened deer through the window and out along the verandah to the morning-room beyond. They had not been more than ten minutes together, how would it have been possible to compress into so short a space the story of her folly and her weakness, and of the miserable cowardice which had driven her into telling him a lie?

After he had gone she tried to console herself with these recollections, and she told herself positively that it was absolutely impossible that she could have done it.

"I will tell him afterwards," she said to herself, "some day, when his love has strengthened and he has learnt to understand me better. I will tell him when he is my husband."

The first little shock that happened to her after he was gone was that there was no letter from Frederick Warne.

Nothing at all came by post for her. It gave her a vague sense of uneasiness that he had not written. Surely her letter was of a kind which required an answer by return. She had expected

her release, and her own few letters to be returned to her, instead of which there was nothing !

What added still more to the feeling of impending trouble which began to oppress her, was the fact that she could not help perceiving lying uppermost on Lady Camilla's little pile of letters a blueish envelope on which were traced the once well-known fine copper-plate characters of old Miss Fairbrother's hand-writing.

When Lady Camilla came down and took her place behind the tea-cups she shuffled all her letters together in a heap so that that especial one no longer was visible, and then she proceeded to wish Helen and Mrs. Torrington good-morning and to pour out their tea.

Of course, Helen argued to herself, there was no earthly reason why Miss Fairbrother should not write to her old pupil, probably she often did so, neither had she the faintest reason to connect her letter with her own anxiety at getting no answer from the old lady's nephew.

Nevertheless, she could not shake off the impression that in some way or other the two incidents were connected with each other, and with her.

After breakfast Mr. Greyson started off in the dog-cart to the country-town, and Lady Camilla asked Dora to come into her boudoir, and the two ladies vanished upstairs together.

Helen hung about the hall doing nothing.

There was no hunting to-day, the glass was rising and there was every indication that the slight frost of the early morning meant increasing and lasting. The book-box had gone back to Mudie's and was not expected to return till the next day, there was nothing to read but the newspapers ; and at twenty the leading articles in the *Times* do not hold out a very tempting prospect to a woman's soul.

She found a stray number of an old magazine

and sat down listlessly before the wide fire-place with it in her hand. The tall clock ticked solemnly and soberly behind her, Ted's old liver-coloured spaniel snored comfortably on the hearth-rug, every now and then a distant door upstairs shut or closed, and nothing else happened at all for the space of a whole hour.

Helen was only pretending to read, her eyes strayed frequently into the fire, and her thoughts were busy recalling every word and look of her lover's in that short interview of the early morning.

She was very happy of course—what woman is not as she remembers the fond words and fonder caresses in which the man she cares for has told her of his love? and yet she was all the time desperately uncomfortable.

She wished from the bottom of her heart that she had never told him that lie, she wished she had found courage to confess the truth to him, and she wished more than all else, that Frederick Warne had written to her. But as all these were vain wishes, they did not succeed in dispelling any of her uneasiness of mind.

All at once Dora Torrington came running downstairs from the boudoir overhead.

"I've got such a brilliant idea, Helen!" she cried out to her, excitedly. "We have nothing on earth to do to-day, have we?"

"Nothing."

"It's horribly dull—not a man in the house, even old Tom away!—and I've got a lovely idea."

"What is it?"

"Well, I want to run up to Town to choose a new dinner dress. I wanted Camilla to go with me, but she says she feels a cold in her head coming on, and had rather not. Will you come with me, Helen?"

"I?" Helen said, with surprise. "But—is there time now?"

"Lots. I don't mean to come back till to-morrow morning. We can stop at the Midland Hotel. I'll telegraph for rooms, and we can go to some play. There is that new piece at the Hay-market. We will telegraph for stalls and go and see it. Do say 'yes,' Helen. It will be quite a little jaunt for us."

"I should, of course, have to take my maid," said Helen, a little dubiously. This "new departure" puzzled her. Mrs. Torrington was not often so genial and so bent upon securing her society.

"Oh, certainly, if you don't mind the expense of it. Of course I am a pauper, and have to think about the shillings."

"Will you let me have the pleasure of being your hostess, Mrs. Torrington, for our little trip?" said Helen, with a sudden flush. "The hotel bill and the stalls shall be my affair. I never know how to spend all the money I have got."

"You are very kind, my dear. Well, since you wish it—and, as you say, you have plenty of money. I certainly have none! Well, it's settled then, and we will go by the three o'clock train. I must run and send off the telegrams. It's very good of you, Helen. You really are a dear girl!" and she gave her a kiss—it was a Judas-kiss, if Helen had only known it! "And you must not call me Mrs. Torrington—you must call me Dora."

Helen assented, with a faint smile, as she submitted to the kiss, and the little widow ran away to write and send off the telegrams.

Helen went slowly upstairs to give the necessary orders to her maid. She was thoughtful. She could not quite understand the meaning of this sudden resolution.

"Perhaps, after all," she thought, "she has no meaning save the very simple one of wanting to enjoy herself and go to a theatre. And, after all,

if I can give her pleasure by going with her, why should I not? Poor woman, I have taken away her lover from her. If she only knew how bitterly remorseful I feel about that. It makes me glad enough to do any little thing to please her!"

By the afternoon, the two ladies, accompanied by Heleu's French maid, Celestine, were on their way to London.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONSPIRATORS.

"Who—to fill his purse—

Still pilfers wretched plans, and makes them worse."

—CHARLES CHURCHILL.

THE letter which Lady Camilla had received from her old governess played most delightfully and unexpectedly into the hands of the two conspirators. Miss Fairbrother had written to ask if Lady Camilla would kindly grant an interview to her dear nephew—her poor sister Jane's son—if he presented himself at the house on the following morning.

"The poor fellow," wrote the old lady, "is very unhappy about Helen Dacre, to whom he is sincerely attached, and who promised long ago to become his wife, but he sadly fears that in her change of fortune and life of pleasure, her heart has become of late somewhat estranged to him, and he hopes to enlist your sympathy, my dearest Lady Camilla, in his case, which is, indeed, for a lover, a very sad one."

There was more of it, pages more, but the upshot of it all was the same thing, that Frederick Warne was coming to Oldpark the next day, and that he desired to see Lady Camilla alone when he did come.

"If only we could get her out of the way to-morrow!" Lady Camilla had exclaimed, after they had talked the situation over together for some time.

"What on earth is there to prevent it? I will take her up to London," cried Dora.

"To London, Dora! Good gracious, on what pretext?"

"Oh, anything will do—my dressmaker—the natural desire of a 'lark' common to all women. I'll ask her to go up with me. We will go to a play—stay at an hotel—flatten our noses at the shop windows in Bond Street to-morrow morning—enjoy ourselves vastly, and return by the afternoon train in time for dinner."

"Dora, you are a perfect genius!" exclaimed her ally, with admiration.

And that the wily widow actually managed to make her victim offer to defray her expenses in the expedition proves indubitably that a genius she most decidedly was!

Meanwhile, Lady Camilla, who was no fool either, was left at Oldpark to perform her part of the affair in their absence.

Her tactics were rendered all the easier because her husband had announced to her his intention, if the frost lasted, of starting off by the night train to Rugby in order to attend a sale of some valuable hunters, out of which he hoped to add one or two well-known animals to his stud.

The frost did last, and Mr. Greyson went away. Lady Camilla, therefore, had Oldpark all to herself.

The answer which she sent to Miss Fairbrother, and which contained a gracious and hospitable message to that forlorn and downhearted lover, her nephew, was soon, like everybody else, on its way to London.

The anonymous letter—to which naturally no

allusion was made by either lady,—had certainly borne ample fruit already!

Lady Camilla spent a solitary evening, not at all unhappily, by herself. In her oldest and most comfortable tea-gown, with easy slippers on her feet and her spectacles upon her nose, she sat in her favourite armchair in the cosy chimney-corner, and buried herself in her novel. It was a very interesting novel, full of stirring situations and of pathetic episodes. There was no end to the misfortunes which the unhappy and beautiful heroine of the tale was made to undergo; and presently Lady Camilla's handkerchief came out of her pocket and she wept copiously and heartbrokenly over the sorrows of the unlucky damsel of fiction.

When she finished the book and got up to go to her bedroom, she surveyed her flushed face, with the swollen eyes and the red nose, in the glass with a critical interest.

"Dear me, I am glad I have been alone to finish that delightful book!" she said aloud to herself. "It has made me cry so dreadfully, that I really am quite an object! It is a mercy there is nobody here to see me! I can't think," she continued, as she put out the lamp and went slowly up the staircase to her bedroom, "what makes me always cry so much when I read a touching story. I suppose it is because I am so tender-hearted. I never can bear to think of a sweet girl being oppressed and bullied and parted from the man she loves, like that poor Euphrosine!" Euphrosine being the name of the heroine over whose woes she had been weeping.

And then she sighed and smiled together, as she reflected that she really had a very warm and loving nature, and that it was exceedingly to her credit that she was able to display so much sympathy with virtue in distress.

But, though Lady Camilla said her prayers that

night, as all good Christian women should do, and got into her warm bed with a serene and tranquil conscience, it never occurred to her in the very least that she had no womanly compassion at all for the unlucky girl whom chance had temporarily consigned to her care, and whom she was even now plotting without remorse or compunction to render perfectly miserable.

If anybody had accused her of such a thing, it is certain that she would have had no tears to shed for Helen Dacre's difficulties, and she would probably have been exceedingly surprised that the natural instinct of self-protection implanted in the breast of a mother should be so cruelly misunderstood and misinterpreted.

The morning dawned, and Lady Camilla, installing herself after breakfast in her cosy boudoir, issued orders that she was at home only to a gentleman whom she expected on business.

In due time, a fly, of that rickety and shabby description which the one vehicle appertaining to a country wayside station usually presents, came crawling slowly up the long avenue—she could watch its approach from the window of her room—and drew up before the door of the house.

A few minutes later Mr. Frederick Warne was ushered into her boudoir.

Well, Lady Camilla was certainly taken somewhat aback by his appearance. He was so shabby, so ungainly and unkempt, so utterly different to the young men of the world in which her life had been spent, that a swift pang of compunction did shoot through her heart at the thought that it was to this underbred and unattractive person that she was prepared to hand over her brother's charming ward, with her sensitive face and her little air of refinement and distinction.

"It is most unchristian of me to feel it," she said to herself, with virtuous reaction a moment after,

"for no doubt he is an excellent man, and will make her an admirable husband. But what boots!—and what clothes!—and I wonder if he ever puts on a clean shirt!"

She welcomed her guest, however, with much cordiality, and requested him to be seated, and mentioned the name of her dear governess, his aunt, as an introduction. She thought she would set him at his ease, but she little knew Frederick Warne. He was quite as much at his ease in the luxurious boudoir of this great lady, with its pictures, and china, and rich draperies, with the scent of the hothouse flowers and all the subtle influences that surround a delicately nurtured woman, as if he had been in his old aunt's bare little study, or facing his girl-students' admiring glances, as they sat in rows on their hard wooden school benches.

Nothing abashed Mr. Warne—he had far too good an opinion of himself. He was not at all the forlorn and desponding lover which Miss Fairbrother had intimated him to be. He was a man who had come to claim his rights, and to proclaim them loudly to begin with.

So, as soon as he had replied to Lady Camilla's inquiries after his aunt's rheumatism, he dashed boldly into the matter which was in his mind.

"I understand, Lady Camilla, that Miss Dacre is at present an inmate of your house?"

"At this very moment she is away, Mr. Warne. She has gone to Town with my cousin—but I expect them back to-night."

"She is under your charge, at all events?"

"Certainly. My brother, Lord Bainton, is, as perhaps you know, her guardian, and for the present he has entrusted her to me."

"Your brother, Lady Camilla, is scheming to rob me of Miss Dacre's affections," continued Warne with a sort of menacing "deny-it-if-you-dare" air.

Lady Camilla coloured and drew herself up with offence, this plain-speaking upon such a very delicate subject was not at all to her liking.

"Sir! I do not understand your meaning," she said, very coldly, and with that glance of haughty displeasure before which her inferiors had often been known to tremble.

Mr. Warne did not tremble at all. He looked at her fixedly through his spectacles and went on with his argument.

"Then I will proceed to make my meaning clear to your ladyship. I was engaged to be married to Miss Dacre whilst she was a pupil-teacher in my aunt's school. She accepted me two years ago of her own free will. She was poor, she was homeless, but it suited me to ask her to become my wife, and she promised to do so. At that time Lord Bainton, who was as much her guardian then as he is now, took no notice of her whatever, he did not care in fact whether she was alive or dead. Now mark what happens. Somebody leaves a large fortune to Miss Dacre, immediately the Earl of Bainton wakes up and remembers his duties to his ward, he appears on the scene, tempts her to leave the safe home where her girlhood has been spent, carries her away with him in spite of my protests, in spite too of my claims, with which I acquainted him instantly, and which he affected to treat as of no consequence at all. What am I to suppose, Lady Camilla, save that Lord Bainton is determined to rob me of my bride?"

"You have a grievance, Mr. Warne, you certainly have a grievance, but you must remember that my brother has certain duties toward Miss Dacre."

"Duties which he omitted entirely until she had become an heiress!" interrupted the injured school-master somewhat rudely.

Lady Camilla bit her lip, she had some difficulty

in keeping her temper ; she intended to use this man as her tool—but what a rough and dirty tool he was, to be sure !

“ Let us talk this matter calmly and dispassionately over, Mr. Warne,” she said, after a pause.

“ Certainly, certainly—I want to talk it over. I want to know whether you will help me to gain possession of what is my own, or whether you are going to help Lord Bainton in his scheme of spoliation.”

“ Mr. Warne, I think you are making use of the most unwarrantable expressions ; I can do nothing for you if you forget the respect due to myself and to the Earl of Bainton.”

“ Madam—my lady I should say—I am not afraid of any man because he is a lord, thank heaven ! My political views have taught me that the aristocracy are a depraved and degenerate race.”

“ Sir, what have your political views about the aristocracy got to do with your love affairs ?” cried Lady Camilla with real and irrepressible anger.

Mr. Warne saw that he had better change his tactics.

“ I stand rebuked—your ladyship is right, and I will not allude to this subject again. What I want is Helen Dacre—I have a right to her.”

“ You have, undoubtedly, Mr. Warne. I am willing to allow your right, but I must disabuse your mind at once of the strange idea which seems to possess you. Miss Dacre has a little money certainly, but Lord Bainton is rich and does not want money, and moreover Miss Dacre would be totally unfitted to become his wife. She does not belong to the Earl of Bainton’s station in life, and a man of his ancient name does not marry beneath him,”—this she added proudly and haughtily, little as she knew it to be true.

"Yet I have seen a letter—a mysterious and incomprehensible letter—which contained a distinct warning that Miss Dacre would soon, if I did not stand up for my rights, be stolen from me."

"I know nothing about your mysterious letters, Mr. Warne," said Lady Camilla hastily, "they have nothing to do with me. I may, however, suggest that Miss Dacre is not ill-looking, and she is rich, there may be *other* fortune-hunters in the field."

She looked at him with meaning, but Frederick Warne was quite unconscious of the implication—he did not consider himself a fortune-hunter at all, only a deserving and superior person who had just claims to what he sought.

"Others?—then indeed I have been wise to come here—poor Helen has no stability of character—I have long feared that vanity and love of pleasure would turn her head—your ladyship must surely agree with me that to become the wife of a man of sobriety and of learning, who is able to guide and direct her, to control the natural frivolity of her disposition, and to strengthen and improve her mental faculties, is quite the best and happiest fate that can befall her."

"I agree with you, Mr. Warne—it will be quite the best thing for her—and for us all!" she added mentally.

"You are prepared to help me then?"

"Certainly, but what can I do?—my brother _____"

"Your brother is not at present in charge of Miss Dacre—if you are on my side much can be done in his absence."

Lady Camilla was quite aware of this, in point of fact it was the basis of her own operations.

"If you will give me my chance," continued Warne, "I shall be able, I think, to persuade Miss Dacre to return to the path of duty. I have a

letter of hers—two, in fact—written some time ago, which completely prove my claim upon her—produced in a court of justice they would certainly establish my right to large and substantial damages.”

“You would threaten her, in fact, with an action for breach of promise?” inquired Lady Camilla with lifted eyebrows—truly this young man was a valuable ally!

“That is my intention,” assented the school-master blandly.

“Well, I will give you your ‘chance’ as you call it, Mr. Warne—I do not suppose that either Miss Dacre or Lord Bainton will care to risk a public scandal, so perhaps you will be able to win your cause—but what do you wish me to do in the matter? How can I be of service to you?”

“Very simply. If your ladyship will kindly ring the bell and desire your servants to prepare a room for me, they can at the same time pay and send away the fly and take my Gladstone bag out of it.”

“Your bag?” gasped Lady Camilla—“you brought your bag?”

“Certainly I did. I felt sure you would invite me to remain the night here.”

“Mr. Warne, you are a veritable Machiavelli!” said Lady Camilla. She rang the bell, and gave the necessary orders, and Mr. Frederick Warne became a fixture.

“Good Lord, what a cad!” exclaimed Lady Camilla aloud, when her unwelcome visitor had, at length, removed himself out of her boudoir. “What an insolent, impudent, outrageous cad! But he is a genius for all that, and if he rids us of Helen Dacre, it’s cheaply bought at the price! Thank Heaven, Tom isn’t coming back till to-morrow! What on earth would he say if he came home and found such a dreadful creature in the house!”

CHAPTER XX.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

“ And oftentimes to win us to our harm
The instruments of darkness tell us truth,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray us
In deepest consequence.”

—SHAKESPEARE.

“ I HAVE a delightful surprise for you, Helen !” were almost Lady Camilla’s first words to the girl on her return from London.

A few whispered words had been exchanged between her ladyship and Mrs. Torrington, and then the latter had run upstairs, for the train had been late, and it was time to dress for dinner, but Helen was unfastening her wraps in the hall and Lady Camilla kept her back for one minute to say this to her.

The girl looked animated and happy—the little trip to London had done her good—she had enjoyed the shops and the gay streets, and above all the excellent play at the Haymarket Theatre, which had been a real delight to her, and besides all this, deep down in her heart, the consciousness of Nugent’s love, the remembrance of his words to her, and the knowledge that in a few hours she would see him again, kept up a perpetual strain of secret joy within her.

Now—with the fatuity of all those who love—when Lady Camilla smiled and kissed her and spoke of a “surprise” for her, her glad thoughts flew at once to the man she loved, and she said to herself, “He is here ! He has come back sooner than he intended, and he has told everything to Lady Camilla !”

The colour rushed in a guilty flame to her cheeks as she answered consciously :

“ A surprise, Lady Camilla ! What can it be ? ”

Her hostess tapped her cheeks playfully. “ Ah, I am not going to tell you ! You shall see when dinner time comes. Oh, you sly puss, to hide your secret so cleverly from me ! But I have found it all out now.”

Naturally Helen blushed more guiltily than ever.

“ Oh, Lady Camilla ! And you are not angry about it then ? ”

“ Angry, my dearest girl ? Why, I am enchanted ! I do so delight in a story of true love—especially when it is love under difficulties. There, there ! ” kissing her again fondly and clingingly. “ Run upstairs and dress, my love and put on your prettiest and most becoming dress—for who can tell who you may find here when you come downstairs again ? ”

Helen obeyed her to the letter. There was a pale blue dress of hers, of soft and shimmering texture, which Gilbert’s eyes had once rested upon with admiration, and in which he had told her one evening in a passing whisper that she looked “ sweet.”

It was this dress which she now took out of her wardrobe and desired her maid to dress her in.

A row of pearls round her white neck, a tiny diamond fly—her guardian’s Christmas present to her—in her dark hair, and the effect was complete. The soft blue draperies set off her graceful figure to perfection. And there was a glow of excitement upon her face and a light of happiness in her large dark eyes which gave the lustre of genuine beauty to her whole aspect.

“ You look *charmante*, mademoiselle,” said her maid, as her young mistress surveyed herself in the long glass before leaving the room. And Helen smiled, and felt glad to think that the girl’s words

were no flattery, and that, for to-night at least, it was true.

"I look my best, I do think," she said to herself, "and he will see me—if only his eyes look approval, I want no other praise!"

She came downstairs into the hall, where it was the custom to assemble before dinner. She was the first, she had made good speed with her toilette in the hopes that Gilbert too might be early, and that an opportunity for a few words with him might be hers, but he did not appear, and presently Lady Camilla's voice became audible upon the wide landing above.

She is talking to somebody—Helen could hear what she was saying.

"Yes, our travellers have come back. The train was late—our trains on this branch line are terribly unpunctual. They had a cold journey, they tell me, but Helen for one is none the worse for it. Ah! here she is herself!"

Helen looked up. Lady Camilla's portly figure, in her brocaded green satin gown, was coming down the staircase, filling up the foreground with its ample proportions, and behind her, in the gloom, she could see a man in evening dress. Her heart stood still. It was not Nugent! Who then was it?

The soft radiance of the rose-shaded lamps below, first illumined Lady Camilla, and then her companion, as they descended one after the other.

Helen fell back. Her hand grasped the back of a chair to steady herself. She asked herself, for one wild moment, if she were awake, or if this were some horrible nightmare. In the next instant, Lady Camilla's laughing voice was saying to her:

"Here, my dear child, is an unexpected pleasure for you! Mr. Warne has come to pay us a little visit. I told you I had a surprise for you! Is she not looking well, Mr. Warne?"

And Helen found herself shaking hands mechanically with the man whom she believed she had got rid of for ever.

Mrs. Torrington came running downstairs. The butler threw open the dining-room door and announced dinner. Lady Camilla passed her arm in a friendly fashion through that of her guest.

"Come along, Mr. Warne," she cried. "I am sorry that it is your fate to take an old woman like me in to dinner. My dears, we have no other gentleman to-night, so you must take care of one another."

Helen and Dora Torrington stood for a moment facing each other.

"Did you know of this?" asked Helen breathlessly, with that straight level look of hers, which Dora always said "gave her the creeps."

"Of this? Of what? Of the advent upon the scene of your admirer? My dear, how could I possibly know of it? Have I not been in London with you?"

'Why is he here? Why has Lady Camilla invited him to stay in the house?' cried Helen passionately.

"My dear child, how can I tell? Come, don't be tragical! We must go in to dinner—the soup will get cold, and I am ravenously hungry!" She passed her arm through Helen's, and drew her towards the dining-room door. "After all, there is nothing to be upset about. The poor man evidently adores you. I thought so, you know, when he called here once before and spoke to me. It is always flattering to a woman to be worshipped, and this is an old standing attachment evidently."

"I must speak to that man alone, directly after dinner," said Helen quickly, almost feverishly. "It is absolutely necessary that I should do so. Dora, will you help me?"

"Certainly, my dear. No doubt the poor man

himself will be only too charmed to have a private interview with you ! ”

They had reached the dining-room. There was nothing more to be said. Helen sat down in gloomy silence. A wild rage was in her heart and reflected itself visibly upon her angry face.

How dare he ! she said to herself. How dare he come here and persecute her with his presence and force himself as a guest into the house ? After she had told him too, that she would not marry him, and that her engagement with him must come to an end !

And then her heart stood still with another fear — Gilbert Nugent was to come back to-night ! At what hour would he arrive ?

With all her heart, she trusted that he would be very late ; he was to stay to dinner with his friends — it was therefore hardly possible that he could be at Oldpark before eleven o'clock ; it was a good ten mile drive, and the night was dark.

By that time she would have spoken her mind to this detestable lover of her youth, and have shut herself up in her own room. She would not be able to see Nugent to-night now, but Frederick, in common decency, might be expected to leave the house by the earliest train in the morning.

All might yet be saved !

She did not know that these two women, who were smiling, and talking and amusing themselves by drawing poor Frederick Warne out, only to laugh at him secretly for his pomposity and his self-conceit, held, in reality, the keys of the situation between them, and had determined upon her ruin.

The dinner, which was to her a perfect purgatory, came to an end at length, and Lady Camilla, requesting Frederick to stay and smoke if he liked, rose from the table.

"I never smoke." He said it with a virtuous frigidity.

"Oh, very well, then, come into the drawing-room with us, though I always think a man should find some inducement to keep out of the drawing-room for half-an-hour after dinner. Will you go into the billiard room? or will you drink some more claret?"

"I neither play billiards nor drink, Lady Camilla," said Warne sternly. "What I wish to do is to speak privately to Miss Dacre."

"Oh, by all means."

"And I, Lady Camilla, wish to speak to Mr. Warne," said Helen, with a heightened colour.

"Far be it from me to part two such fond lovers for an instant longer!" exclaimed Lady Camilla with a smile, whilst Dora laughed—that cruel, mocking little laugh of hers.

"Go into the library, you poor turtle doves!" she cried, pushing them both along the passage playfully; "there are lights and a fire and all sorts of comfortable arm-chairs there! You will be able to enjoy yourselves thoroughly."

"Dora, how can you?" cried Helen, indignantly.

"Mrs. Torrington scarcely apprehends the gravity of the situation," said Warne coldly, "and to apply the word 'turtle dove' to a person in my position in the world is scarcely—scarcely——"

"Scarcely proper! I daresay you mean," laughed Dora. "Oh, dear me, Mr. Warne, you really will be the death of me! you are too, too utterly funny."

But as nobody else seemed to see the fun of it, Dora had the laugh all to herself.

Poor Helen would rather have gone through her interview anywhere but in the library—that room that was sacred to her from a *tête-à-tête* of a totally different character! But as apparently everything had been prepared for her there—it

only occurred to her long afterwards to wonder why—she acquiesced meekly in the arrangement.

Lady Camilla and her cousin went into the drawing-room together, whilst, with a horrible feeling of dread and repulsion, she led the way into the library, Frederick following her jauntily, as a man does when he feels he has got his enemy under his thumb.

Dora Torrington could settle to nothing. She could not sit still for one single minute ; her excitement was intense ; she went from the clock on the mantelpiece backwards and forwards to the windows a dozen times.

“ Oh, I wish he would come ! I wish he would come ! ” she kept on saying.

“ My dear, do keep still, you fidget me dreadfully. I tell you Gilbert must be here almost immediately.”

She drew a letter she had received from Nugent that morning out of her pocket, and referred to it. “ He says he will not wait for dinner there, but will ask for a sandwich when he gets back from shooting and start off at once, as he wants to get back here quickly. ‘ I shall be with you by nine,’ he says. It is five minutes past nine now ! ”

“ Well, and here he is ! ” cried Lady Camilla. “ I hear the sound of wheels coming up the avenue.”

Dora flew out into the hall. Gilbert Nugent came in out of the darkness wrapped in a heavy fur coat. He saw Dora’s light figure running forward towards him across the fire-lit hall, and Lady Camilla’s face framed in the doorway of the drawing-room beyond. He threw a rapid glance round as he entered, but no one else was there.

“ Come in and get warm,” cried Dora to him gaily. “ Have you had a good shoot ? Have you enjoyed yourself ? Come in, come in, we have such lots to tell you ! ”

He laid aside his coat and went into the drawing-room. Again he looked eagerly round, but Helen Dacre was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XXI.

"I WILL NEVER FORGIVE YOU."

"Though this may be play to you,
'Tis death to us."

—L'ESTRANGE.

"BUT I don't understand, Dora !"

"Never mind. You are not required to understand. I only want you to come with me, as I tell you."

Nugent looked puzzled and a little bit uneasy ; he was standing up on the hearthrug before the drawing-room fire ; he had not yet sat down.

Dora stood dragging at him by the hands.

Lady Camilla was laughing a little to herself.

"Don't ask questions. Just come with me, I have something to show you."

"What is it ? Why can't you let me alone ? I am cold. Do let me wait and warm myself. What silly joke have you got in your head now, Dora ?" and then again he looked round the room. Where on earth was Helen ? Why did she not come ? She must know he had come back !

"Where is Miss Dacre ?" he asked suddenly. "She is not ill, I hope ?"

"Oh dear no—she is all right. I don't know where she is ; but do come, Gilbert."

"I can't think why you cannot leave a fellow in peace when he is cold and tired," he grumbled.

Her childish eagerness annoyed him ; he was thinking about Helen ; he had hurried home with as much haste as he could, in the hope of getting a few words with her—and now she was nowhere to be seen !

"What on earth do you want me to do?" he asked impatiently.

"Only just to come with me—there is really something most amusing that I want you to see; you will laugh so much."

Nugent felt no inclination for laughter—the broadest farce, the most extravagant comic situation could scarcely at that moment have drawn a smile from him—he was far too anxious, too much in earnest, and too much in love!

However, for peace sake, he saw that he had better give in to Mrs. Torrington's request, and very unwillingly and somewhat ill-humouredly he allowed himself to be led out of the room. As he went through the door he heard again Lady Camilla's little laugh, in which there was a note of triumph as well as of amusement.

Now, it must be explained that along one side of Oldpark House—the side into which opened the morning-room and also the library windows—there ran a long covered verandah, glazed in at the sides, and comfortably roofed over above. This verandah was in winter-time heated with hot air, and, being thickly carpeted and furnished with comfortable couches and chairs, besides being decorated along the outer side with plants, was in bad weather, a favourite resort of the occupants of the house. One window of the morning-room—a window that was in fact a door—opened into it, and two of the French windows at the side of the library.

When Dora got outside the drawing-room door, she seized Gilbert's long, red neck-scarf from the hall table, where he had thrown it aside on entering, and playfully insisted on blindfolding him.

Little as he was in the mood for foolish pleasantries, Nugent reflected that "in for a penny, in for a pound," and that he might as well not

waste more time in objections, but submit, with the best grace that he could, to her caprices.

Dora therefore bound the scarf tightly over his eyes, and led him away captive.

She took him into the morning-room, and out into the verandah, until she reached the first of the windows that gave into the library. It was quite dark in the verandah, so that, to persons within the room, anyone outside would be quite invisible. Drawing forward a chair, she pushed him down into it.

"Now," she said, "you are to count fifty, and then you are to take off your bandage, and you shall see—what you shall see!"

"What infernal nonsense is this!" he muttered, but still he obeyed her, because he fancied that it was some game—some *tableau vivant*, perhaps—some feminine entertainment which the three ladies, left all day to their own devices, had amused themselves by organising for his benefit.

Dora crept away on tip-toe—he heard the soft rustle of her receding skirts—then a moment of silence—next a clicking sound, curiously like the turning of a key in a door—then, oddly enough, the murmuring sound of voices in front of him—two voices, a man's and a woman's, which answered one another.

With a sudden premonition of evil, he tore the scarf from his eyes. The window before which he sat was ajar. Dora had put it so purposely before she had gone in to dinner, the curtains were drawn back; he could both see and hear the occupants of the library. With a smothered exclamation he stepped away from the window, and went hurriedly back to the door of the morning room. It was locked from the other side, and Dora Torrington had vanished!

Save through the library there was no way of escape from the trap into which she had led him.

Drawn back by an irresistible force, he retraced his steps and stood before the library window. He saw Helen, Helen, who only two mornings ago, in that self-same room, had leant against his heart and had listened, yielding and consenting to his confession of love! Helen, who now stood there alone with another man—a perfect stranger to him! He could not see her face because her back was turned to the windows, but the expression of the man's face, despite its vulgarity and ungainliness, was quite unmistakeable—it was the face of a man who speaks to the woman he covets for his own.

Honour, no doubt, should have bid Gilbert Nugent throw wide open the half-closed window and disclose at once to the couple within that they were no longer alone; but there is something in a man's breast, which, when it is most thoroughly aroused, is stronger even than his honour—that something is jealousy!

It is perhaps one of the most hideous of all human passions, and at the same time it is one of the strongest; a man who is jealous is no longer master of himself—he loses his self-control and does and says things which would be impossible to him in his saner moods.

For the moment, then, this demon of jealousy took possession of Gilbert Nugent.

She was false then—this girl upon whose truth and faith he would have staked his existence!

What other interpretation could he put upon her presence here—alone, in the evening, with this man—in a room away from the others?—or was there not by some wonderful chance some other meaning to that which his eyes and his senses revealed to him? What had this man to do with her? Who was he? At all costs he must know! The truth, at any price!

He pushed the window yet a little more widely

open, and Helen's words as he did so sounded clearly in his ears.

"You had no right to come here—no right to persecute me!"

Then at any rate she did not love him! Perhaps then all was well—he was only some unwelcome suitor pressing his unwished for attentions upon her.

But the man's words in answer sent this theory tumbling to pieces.

"I have every right," said Frederick Warne stoutly, "and I intend to force my right. I have your written words—letters which you yourself have sent me."

"Ah! for pity's sake give me back those letters!"

"Certainly not! they are my property. I value them—they are precious to me—they contain promises which I do not intend to allow you to break with impunity."

"You are capable, then, of threatening me?"

"I am capable of everything, Helen, in order to make you return to your duty. Your head has been turned by wealth and prosperity——"

"No, no! you do not understand me!"

"Do not interrupt me," said the schoolmaster, in his most dictatorial manner. "Your moral nature has become debased since you have cast in your lot with frivolous worldlings, with sycophants who only flatter you for your money. You have forgotten those who cared for you and who sheltered you from evil when you were poor and friendless; you are ungrateful to those friends of the past."

"Indeed, indeed, I am not ungrateful. I can never forget your aunt's kindness to me—nor yours—but—but——!"

"There can be no 'but' in the matter; you are bound to me. You promised me years ago to become my wife—you are engaged to me—you

cannot, you shall not break that engagement, which you entered into of your own free will."

The window crashed open behind them—Gilbert Nugent strode across the room.

"It is a lie!" he cried, loudly and roughly, "a base, cowardly lie!"

Helen shrank back with a faint cry. Nugent's face was distorted with passion—he stood between them both, like an avenging Nemesis, looking angrily from one to the other. "It is a lie!" he repeated once more, as though he could not say it often enough.

Frederick Warne settled his spectacles upon his nose and gazed with mild curiosity at the intruder.

"Ahem! I do not quite know who you are, sir, nor why you interrupt me in this violent manner, and with such—a—immoderate expressions. But if you will kindly explain your intrusion, I will give you a reasonable hearing."

"And I do not know by what right *you* are here alone with this lady, sir!" retorted Nugent furiously, "nor why you make assertions concerning her that have no foundation in truth. Miss Dacre is engaged to be married to me—she can have nothing whatever to do with you—I must therefore insist upon your leaving the room at once."

Frederick Warne smiled with tranquil superiority.

"You are labouring under a delusion, my dear sir. Miss Dacre has been engaged to me for nearly three years, she cannot possibly be engaged to you."

"I do not believe it."

"I am sorry," and Frederick shrugged his shoulders contemptuously: "how can I convince you? here are Miss Dacre's letters," he produced a packet from his pocket and held it out for inspection.

Gilbert's eyes fell upon the handwriting. It

was undoubtedly Helen's. He pushed the man's hand roughly away.

"Or, if you still doubt me and will not read them, ask Miss Dacre herself—she will scarcely to my face be able to deny her relations to me."

Nugent turned towards her. Her white face, her trembling form, and averted eyes, struck a cold chill of horrible conviction to his heart.

"Helen," he said, controlling himself with difficulty and speaking in a low and calmer voice, "will you not deny this man's statements, and tell him that they are false?"

"I cannot," she murmured almost inaudibly.

"They—they are true then?"

"They are true." Her voice was almost extinct. There was a moment of profound silence.

Then Nugent turned and said in a perfectly quiet and polite manner:

"I must apologize very sincerely, Mr.—Mr.—?"

"Warne, sir, Warne."

"Thanks! Mr. Warne, for my intrusion, and for the violence of my language to you, I must beg that you will pardon me. Will you, however, reward evil with good by permitting me to say three words in private to this lady, ere I wish her farewell and remove myself out of her way for ever? I shall esteem it as a great favour if you will grant me this trifling request."

"Certainly, sir, certainly. I cannot refuse so reasonable a demand; and as I am a guest in Lady Camilla's house till to-morrow, I shall no doubt have the opportunity of finishing my conversation with Miss Dacre in the morning, when I trust she will be in a more reasonable frame of mind."

He bowed and left the room.

Gilbert and Helen were left alone. She sank down upon a sofa, and buried her face in her arms.

It did not occur to her to excuse or to justify

herself. She knew his high standard of truth, and she knew that she had fallen from it. There was nothing more to be said.

"Then," he said, at length, after a silence that seemed to her to be interminable, "then you lied to me?"

A long low sob was her only reply.

"And I, who believed in you! who trusted you! who thought you the incarnation of goodness! why did you do it?"

She lifted her tear-stained face.

"Because I loved you, Gilbert, and because I meant to break off my engagement to that man as soon as I could."

"You were engaged to him then? and knowing this you engaged yourself to me? May I enquire," he continued with a sneer more cruel than his reproaches, "whether you intended to carry on the farce to the bitter end and to marry us *both*?"

"Oh, do not be hard on me, do not be hard." She sunk down from her seat and fell on her knees at his feet, uplifting her clasped hands in piteous entreaty towards him, "do not be hard—remember that I loved you."

"And yet when I asked you, when I begged you to be open with me, to tell me the truth, when I laid bare my own life to you and told you all my past, yet you were afraid! and you spoke that pitiful lie, knowing that I should never forgive you!"

He spoke sternly, turning resolutely away, so that he should not see her streaming eyes nor be softened by the sight of her pleading face.

She clung to his arm, dragging herself after him on her knees as he tried to move away from her.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me," she wailed, "forgive me, take me back!"

"No—I will never forgive you," he said coldly and angrily. "How could I ever believe in you

again? Your lips would never again seem to speak the truth, your eyes would look deception, your every gesture would awaken my constant suspicion! How can a man take back so false a thing as you are?"

She rose, staggering blindly to her feet. Her prayer, her humiliation, had been in vain.

They stood a little way apart, he with averted head and gloomy brow, she white to the lips, her hands folded meekly across her breast, her eyes, full of an unutterable tragedy, fixed despairingly upon him.

"How could I tell that you would take it so cruelly?" she asked, then, as he answered nothing, she said again, this time in a far-away voice that sounded dim and unreal even in her own ears, "Then it is all over?"

"Yes, it is all over," he answered, and without another look he turned away and left the room.

The door closed softly behind him. There was an instant in which she did not move, then suddenly she put up both hands to her head, and with a quick gasping breath fell forward on to the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXII.

PERSECUTION.

"I am not now in fortune's power,
He that is down can fall no lower,"

—BUTLER.

ALL the next day Helen lay in bed in her darkened room. Her head was racked with pain, sleep had not once visited her during the whole night. She tossed about from side to side on her tumbled pillows and could find no rest. She was in a burning fever, and all the time the aching anguish at her heart was worse—far worse to bear—than any mere physical pain.

Lady Camilla came once in the morning and stood by her bedside.

"You are very feverish, my dear; you had better let me send for a doctor. You are going to be ill, I am afraid," and she laid a not unkindly hand upon the girl's burning forehead.

"No, no, I am not ill," she moaned; "only let me lie here, I cannot get up."

"You shall not get up if you don't want to;" then after minute she added, "poor Mr. Warne is so unhappy; he cannot go away, if you are ill, he says, so I have asked him to stay on."

No answer, only Helen twisted herself round upon her pillows and hid her face from her hostess' sight.

"Will you not send him a kind message, poor man?" asked Lady Camilla, presently.

But there was no answer to her question, and after waiting vainly for a few minutes she stole away quietly from the room.

Later on in the day Mrs. Torrington too paid her a visit.

"How are you, my dear?" she said briskly, "better I hope? You must have caught a chill in London I suppose. Are you not going to get up for dinner?"

"No—I want to be quiet," was her only answer.

"Dear me, what a bore it is your being ill!" cried the widow cheerfully, "we are all so dull without you. Your beloved is sulking in a chimney corner over the newspaper, Camilla is dozing over her poor-work, and, now that Gilbert has gone, I haven't a soul to speak to."

Helen lifted herself a little upon her tumbled pillows and looked at her.

"He has gone?" she asked faintly, fixing her haggard eyes upon her visitor.

"Oh, dear, yes! he was off directly after breakfast, full of delight at the prospect of a week's

capital pheasant shooting! Men always fall on their feet, my dear!—if it can't be hunting, then it's shooting, or if they can't get either, they can always flirt and break some wretched woman's heart by way of sport—Gilbert is a good hand at *that* game, as I daresay *you* have found out by now! For being able to make a complete and utter fool of any woman who is weak enough to listen to him—commend me to Gilbert Nugent above all men upon earth! You see I know his little ways so well!”

“You—you think then—that he fools women?—that—that he means nothing?”

“Think it!—why, I know it, my dear child! For, bound to me though he is, I often used to suffer myself on account of Gilbert's peculiarities; but I've got used to them by now—I've got used to them! I take no notice of his flirtations, that is the best way; I used to break my heart over them, but I have learnt wisdom. Just now, for instance, I might very easily be making myself wretched, seeing that Mrs. Delastair, whom he has gone to stay with, is one of the most outrageous flirts I ever came across, and that she is simply madly in love with Gilbert!”

“But surely she is married—there is a Mr. Delastair, is there not?”

“To be sure there is, you sweet innocent! But you don't suppose that stands in the way, do you? Oh! Mrs. Delastair is not too particular, I assure you! and Gilbert is so weak, she can make him do anything. He is going to have a very fine time indeed, with Mrs. Delastair, you may be certain—a real desperate flirtation! But you see I am philosophical, and it doesn't trouble me!”

Helen had closed her eyes, she lay back upon her pillows pale and exhausted; every word seemed to cut into her heart like a knife. Dora looked at her curiously.

"I've given her something to lie and think about!" she thought viciously. "I'll teach her to come between me and mine again!"

"I wish you would go," said Helen presently, opening her eyes once more.

"Well, upon my word, you are not particularly polite, my dear girl! Have I annoyed you by telling you the truth about our fascinating Gilbert? Try not to care, my dear—be philosophical, as I am! You see it doesn't disturb *me* much!"

"Because you don't love him," said Helen coldly; "if you did you could not endure to think he had gone away to flirt with a horrid married woman!"

Dora laughed quite pleasantly. "Well, I wouldn't distress myself on his account if I were you! Out of sight is out of mind with Gilbert Nugent, my dear, and any little notice he may have taken of you——"

"Will you go!—go!—go!" she cried, driven almost past bearing. "Don't you see that I am ill, and I want to be let alone? Your very voice is a torture to me!"

"Oh, certainly, I will go. I am only sorry I took the trouble to come to see such an ungrateful, disagreeable young woman!" and the widow flounced out of the room in a pretended rage, slamming the door noisily after her as she went.

But outside in the passage she laughed again, for she was not at all angry really—she was only delighted. Delighted that she had been able to stab her enemy yet deeper with her cruel and malicious words—words for which there was not a shadow of foundation—for no one knew better than Mrs. Torrington did, that, far from being the bold and unscrupulous flirt she had described her to be, Mrs. Delastair's whole character and conduct was so much above the shadow of a reproach, as to lay her open to the imputation of being almost a prude.

The day wore to a close without bringing to Helen any relief. She continued perfectly prostrate—the hot fever of the first few hours had abated, and she remained only so weak that she was incapable either of thought or of movement.

“All is over,” she said to herself aloud more than once, repeating the last words he had spoken to her with a sort of dull apathy.

If life could only have been over as well! But when our hearts are broken we are not often permitted to lay down the burden of existence too. We are forced to get up, maimed, and faint, and bruised as we are, and to take up that load once more, and stumble on with it in some fashion to the end.

At twenty, too, there is still so much of life before us to be got over, so little of it left behind! And if once the young spirit be crushed or subdued out of its glad independence, who may tell how easily it may not be coerced and broken down?

No one knew this better than did Lady Camilla. That was probably why she had pressed Frederick Warne to remain at Oldpark until Helen should be better.

Hearts, it is well known, have been not infrequently caught at the rebound, and in the absence both of her elderly admirer and the more dangerously fascinating Nugent, Helen, thought her enemies, might very possibly be persuaded to console herself with the constancy and undoubted devotion of the lover of her youth.

It was decreed between them that pressure should be brought to bear upon her.

With the evening Mr. Greyson returned home, and great was his amazement to find Mr. Frederick Warne installed on a familiar footing in his own house.

“Who in the name of fortune is this fellow you

have got staying here ? ” he enquired irritably of his wife, when she had followed him upstairs into his dressing-room.

“ You may well ask, my dear,” replied Lady Camilla, laughing. “ Isn’t he an awful creature ? However, it’s not *my* doing that he is here, as you may imagine. He came to see Helen Dacre ; it appears that he is engaged to be married to her, but she is treating him rather badly, poor man ; she pretended to be ill and has stopped in her bed all day, and the man refuses to go away without seeing her. What on earth was I to do ? ”

“ What confounded nonsense ! Why don’t you make her get up ? But I say, my love, how about your little plans for her ? What a sly puss she must be to have kept this engagement dark ! Well, anyhow, let us hope it will take her safely out of harm’s way as far as Bainton is concerned.”

“ I am sure I hope so, but what am I to do with her if she won’t get up ? We don’t want this dreadful man quartered upon us for ever.”

“ Certainly not. Make her get up and see him this evening. Tell her she must come down to dinner—say that I have said she must, if you like. Then the man can go by the 10 o’clock train to-morrow morning and we shall get rid of him ; and, my love, had you not better write and tell Bainton ? ”

Lady Camilla was less prepared to adopt this suggestion than the previous one, but armed with her husband’s authority she marched up forthwith to Helen’s bedroom, poked the fire, lit the candles upon the dressing-table, and sat herself down resolutely by the side of the bed.

“ Now, my dear child, you really must exercise a little self-control ; you cannot live in bed for ever, and it is time that you should get up and join the rest of the family. Mr. Greyson has returned, and he particularly desires you to come down to dinner.

You say that you are not ill and will not let me send for the doctor, so that there can be no reason for your remaining in bed any longer. There is an hour before dinner, so now get up at once like a good child, and I will send your maid to you."

Helen lifted herself a little upon her pillows and fixed her eyes, haggard and disfigured by weeping, upon her.

"Has Mr. Warne gone away?" she asked. "If he has, I'll get up."

"No, he has not gone away, and he refuses to do so until he has seen you once more. Really, Helen, you are very inconsiderate; don't you see to what inconvenience you are putting Mr. Greyson and myself by your obstinacy? I have, of course, been glad to be civil to Mr. Warne for your sake, but naturally we don't want him here for ever, and Mr. Greyson has friends of his own coming to stay to-morrow, so that, in point of fact, we want his room."

"Why don't you tell him so?"

"I have done so, but he will not take the hint; all he says is, that when he has seen you he will go—not before."

Helen sank back despairingly.

"I will not see him! I will not see him!" she began somewhat wildly, then all at once she became calmer, and in a different voice she added, "I am very ungrateful, Lady Camilla, you must forgive me; I will try and do as you wish—but oh! will you not help me? Will you not advise me?" She reached out her hands and took hold of Lady Camilla's, bending her face down so that her tears dropped one by one upon them.

"I have no one," she wailed, "no one to help me! Oh, you who are so much older and wiser—can you not tell me what to do? I cannot marry Frederick Warne—I do not love him! How am I to escape from it? Oh, do—do help me!"

For a moment Lady Camilla's heart misgave her. That piteous appeal from the orphan girl, those scalding tears upon her hands, that trembling prayer for help touched even her cold and selfish nature with pity.

"You, who are a mother," continued poor Helen in her misery, "will you not be a mother to me, who have none?" but at these words Lady Camilla remembered Ted and his prospects, and hardened herself quickly again into granite.

"My dear Helen, I will give you my advice with pleasure," she answered coldly, "although I fear that you will not like what I am going to say, for most distinctly do I believe it to be your duty to keep your plighted word given years ago to Mr. Warne, who seems a most estimable young man and does not deserve to be jilted in so shameful a manner. I must therefore request you to get up at once, and to come downstairs and give him a proper answer to his wishes."

Helen dropped Lady Camilla's hands and dashed the tears away from her eyes. Her head fell back upon her pillow and a little hopeless sigh broke from her lips.

There was no help for her here, then! She had made her appeal, and had failed, and now there was no one but herself to be depended on. But was there no one? Had she not still one friend?

Suddenly an entirely new idea flashed into her mind, taking her breath away a little as it did so.

"Now promise me to get up, Helen," Lady Camilla was saying to her once more; "be a good child, and get up at once."

"If you will go away, I will get up," answered Helen; "and I will come downstairs — not to dinner, but immediately afterwards."

Lady Camilla deemed it wiser to be satisfied with this concession, and murmuring a few words of approbation, left the room.

No sooner had the door closed upon her than Helen sprang from the bed. She had no time to lose.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FLIGHT.

“The heart bowed down by weight of woe
To weakest hope will cling.”

—A. BUNN.

IT was so short a time ago since Helen had been travelling homewards from London in the darkness of a winter evening, that to find herself once more in the train seemed only like a curious continuation of her previous adventures in Town. The last two days and their incidents, the loss of her lover, the persecution she had endured from Frederick Warne and from Lady Camilla, her own illness and despair—all seemed like a horrible and unreal nightmare, out of which she had fought and struggled vainly to awaken, but from which the rushing train was now bearing her every moment farther and farther away.

And yet when the many lights of London began to shine out feebly on every side through the dark and murky atmosphere, a terrible sense of her loneliness and of the desperate straits which had driven her into flight from the house that had been her home during the last two months, reminded her but too surely that her unhappiness was true and actual enough.

It had all been so hurried. From the moment when, upon Lady Camilla's cruel and heartless repulse, she had suddenly resolved that nothing on earth should force her into another interview with Frederick Warne, and that to avoid it she would make her escape from her tormentors, until the moment when she had put that idea into execution and had actually turned her back for ever upon

Oldpark, she had scarcely had time to breathe, far less to realise the importance of the step she was about to take, nor to weigh its possible consequences.

She dressed herself quickly and quietly, without summoning her maid, and packing a dressing-bag with a few indispensable necessities, she wrapped herself up warmly in a long fur cloak and concealed her face beneath a thick veil, and thus equipped she awaited the moment when the inmates of the house were all occupied with the dinner in the dining-room, in order to creep noiselessly downstairs and out at the front door.

To walk down the avenue along the frozen road to the village, and from thence to take the village fly to the station, had been a simple and easy matter ; she had plenty of money with her, and when she made the good people at the public-house understand that she meant to catch the 8.40 up train, and was ready to pay handsomely if they helped her to do so, she encountered no difficulty in carrying out her wishes. That she was easily recognised as the young lady staying at the big house did not disturb her, because it must certainly be over an hour before any alarm as to his disappearance could be given at the house, and by then she would be well on her way to London, and there was, moreover, no later train by which she could be followed.

So she effected her escape quite easily, and without the smallest hindrance. But when the journey was over and she got to the London terminus, she began for the first time to realise that she was indeed alone in the world.

Her experience of London was small ; she had never been alone in the great city before, and when she found herself in a four-wheeled cab, with her bag by her side, all sorts of foolish fears and apprehensions beset her.

The way to Portman Square seemed interminable, the endless turnings of the narrow streets bewildered her—she knew neither where she was, nor whither she was going, and the sickly glare of the gaslights through the yellow fog did nothing to enlighten her position. She had read stories—who has not?—of cabmen who have been evil characters, and who have driven ignorant and lonely female passengers into foul slums, and there have robbed and even murdered them! and although, no doubt, such fancies are exceedingly silly and far-fetched, yet she could not help recalling these tales of horror and dwelling nervously upon the possibility of their being repeated in her own case.

It was indeed a relief to her when, after what seemed to her over an hour of objectless turnings and twistings in every conceivable direction, the cab drew up at length before a lofty portico, and the cabman—a most respectable father of a family, if she had only known it—descended from his box and put his head in at the window.

“Shall I ring the bell, miss?”

“Is this the house?” asked Helen, peering nervously out through the fog, and then, to her unspeakable relief, it seemed to her that she recognized the door.

“This is No. 52, Portman Square, fast enough. Shall I ring?”

“Yes, please—or no—let me out, please.”

The man opened the door and helped her out, and carried her bag on to the doorstep, and then, with that discrimination concerning the innocence and ignorance of his “fares” which the London cabman usually displays, he boldly and unblushingly asked for exactly double the money to which he was lawfully entitled.

Helen, knowing no better, paid it without a word, and cabby, remounting his box with a civil

"thank ye, miss," and an internal chuckle over his own acuteness, drove away into the fog and was seen no more.

Helen and her bag waited upon the doorstep. It seemed a very long time before anybody answered the bell, and she was upon the point of ringing again when she heard approaching footsteps across the flagged hall within, and the door opened. An insolent-looking young footman, still struggling into one sleeve of the coat he had leisurely donned upon the summons of the doorbell, looked out at her.

"Is Lord Bainton at home?" enquired Helen timidly.

"Yes, he is at 'ome, but you can't see 'im," was the uncivil reply.

"Oh, but I must see him if he is at home," said Helen, making a movement to enter the house. But the youth stood well before the open door and barred the way.

"My orders is to admit no one," he said impudently, "no admittance 'ere except on business. So you clear off, Miss."

It was certain that Helen could not enter into physical opposition with a footman and yet, short of endeavouring to push by him by force, there seemed to be no chance of her affecting an entrance into her guardian's house. Crimson with shame and with anger too, she was on the point of drawing back in despair, when, over the footman's head, she perceived the form of the portly butler advancing to the assistance of his inferior officer. The footman she had never seen before, but, to her unspeakable relief, she remembered the butler perfectly, having seen him on the only occasion that she had been to the house before, when her guardian had brought her up from Aberdare House to London last September.

She called to him by name and Davis came quickly forward.

"Why, gracious me, it's Miss Dacre;" he exclaimed. "Out of the way, Charles—don't you see it's a lady? Stand aside and let Miss Dacre in, and take her bag at once, you blockhead."

"My orders was to admit no one," grumbled the crestfallen Charles, "'ow was I to know who a young person on foot with no luggage to speak of might chance to be?"

"Can't you tell a lady when you see one?" retorted his chief, angrily. "I'm sure I hope you'll excuse him, miss, he only came in last week, and he haven't learnt any manners yet." Which was rather hard upon Charles, who, after all, had only done exactly what he had been told to do.

When she was inside the hall, which was large and well-warmed with a blazing fire, Helen turned again to the butler.

"I want to see my guardian at once, please, Davis. Can you take me to him?"

"Dear me, miss, I hope there is no bad news from Oldpark that has brought you up so sudden? Her ladyship——?"

"Her ladyship is perfectly well. There is nothing amiss," answered Helen, quickly, and her heart began to beat as she spoke. "Tell Lord Bainton that it is quite upon my own affairs that I have come to London—go to him at once."

"I am very sorry, miss, I cannot. The doctor is with him."

"The doctor!" repeated Helen, falling back; "he is ill then?"

"Very ill, I am afraid; he did not wish Lady Camilla to know anything, so I must ask you not to mention it—but his lordship has been unwell ever since he come to Town, and this morning he was so much worse he sent for his physician, Doctor Wright, and Doctor Wright wished for a

second opinion, so we are expecting Sir Augustus Rolls every minute for a consultation ; that was how it was Charles was told so specially not to admit anybody, if you will kindly make that excuse for him, miss."

"Oh, say no more about that !" cried Helen, "it doesn't matter at all." And then, poor child, because she was so tired and faint and troubled, and because this bad news about her only friend had come upon her so suddenly, she sank down upon a carved oak chair and burst into tears.

Davis was much distressed, and entreated her to come into the library, where there was a fire and a lamp, and at that moment a carriage without was heard to pull up at the door and the bell rang loudly.

"That must be Sir Augustus," said Davis, as he hurried Helen into the library. "I will send the housekeeper to you, miss."

After a few minutes, the housekeeper, a kindly-faced, motherly person, made her appearance, and Helen soon found herself kindly treated and deferentially waited upon—her walking things were taken from her, a pair of shoes from her small luggage placed upon her feet in the place of her thick boots, and a tray with food and wine was brought to her.

But although she was, in truth, exhausted for want of rest and nourishment, she could neither sit still for many seconds, nor could she swallow more than a few mouthfuls of bread and wine.

The knowledge that those doctors upstairs were sitting in conclave over her guardian's condition, the fear that his life might be in danger, and the feeling that she could do nothing but wait helplessly until perhaps the worst of news should be brought to her, drove her into a perfect fever of suspense and anxiety.

She thought over all Lord Bainton's kindness

and affection to her, recalling numberless instances of his forethought and consideration, and she reproached herself bitterly that she had undervalued his devotion, and never done or said enough to express to him her gratitude for his goodness to her. Even his unfortunate desire to marry her, that had scared and horrified her so much, in the face of real illness and danger, ceased to shock and terrify her.

She felt that if only his life might be spared and his health restored, there was nothing on earth which she would not do to prove her gratitude to him.

After all, she thought, as she sat counting the weary moments, whilst miserable tears flowed again and again from her eyes—after all, what other friend had she on earth but him?

Lady Camilla had turned against her and striven to drive her into a hateful marriage; Mrs. Torrington had tricked and betrayed her, the man she loved had condemned and renounced her. She had no other friend on earth but Lord Bainton—to him alone could she turn for help, and if he were to die—Oh! what then was to become of her?

It was nearly an hour before a sudden opening and shutting of doors and rapid footsteps across the hall without, together with a confused murmur of voices, told her that the doctors were at length taking their departure. Helen, pale with alarm and anxiety, sprang from her seat and rushed to the door. She was just in time to see the two elderly and serious-looking physicians ushered out of the house by the bowing Davis.

"Well?" she cried, rushing across the hall, as the butler closed and barred the mahogany doors. She could not utter another word, but her white and anxious face asked the rest.

"Well, miss, I am thankful to tell you that there are good hopes of his lordship's getting over this attack."

"Thank God ! Thank God !"

"It seems he has had a sort of a fit, but there has been no return of it, and no signs of any return, and Sir Augustus says if he can keep right for the next twenty-four hours or so, he will in all human probability pull through and be able to be about again. Only, of course, he must be kept quite quiet."

"Then I fear—I cannot see him ?"

"Not to-night, miss."

"Can I not help to nurse him ?"

"There is a nurse upstairs the doctors have sent. No, miss, you can do nothing but go to bed, and the sooner the better, if I might be so bold as to say so."

"You did not tell him I was here ?"

"No, Miss Dacre. But I told the doctors, and they said that if he has a good night and they find in the morning that he is going on well, it would do him good to see you, very likely. So you see there is nothing for it but patience, miss. And there's your bedroom all ready for you, so, if you will go upstairs, the housemaid shall wait on you, and we must hope for better news in the morning."

So Helen went to bed, and so worn out was she by all the changes and emotions of this weary and eventful day, that no sooner had she lain her head upon her pillow than she fell into a deep and dreamless slumber, and never woke again until it was broad daylight.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HER ONLY FRIEND

“Youth is a blunder—Old age a regret,”
—CONINGSBY.

TO meet again a person whom we have last seen in ordinary health, after serious illness, however brief, has laid its touch upon him must always be productive of a certain shock to the feelings of a sensitive person. For it is impossible but that sickness should create a subtle change in the familiar face and form which we have been accustomed to see in health and activity.

Helen, when towards noon on the following day she was ushered into the dimly-lighted bedroom where her guardian, propped up on his pillows, awaited her visit, was immediately conscious of an undefinable alteration in him.

It is not too little to say that, in spite of the favourable and encouraging report which the doctors had given of him at their morning's visit, and in spite of the apparently slight nature of the attack he had gone through, she had no sooner caught sight of the white face and hollow eyes, of the wasted hands eagerly held out to greet her, than a sudden conviction struck like a cold chill to her heart, and she felt that Death had set his mark upon the man!

She was certain of it. Later on, she doubted and wavered; hope asserted itself once more, and she strove to persuade herself that her own ignorance and nervousness had led her into terrors that had no foundation, yet all these after-thoughts never completely sufficed to wipe out that first dire

impression which his appearance made upon her as she entered his room.

"My dearest child!" he said, in a faint voice, as he took her hand in his, "this is indeed a pleasure! I hear that you came last night? You must have divined, I think, by magic, how much I longed for you. Sit down—sit down, my dear."

His evident delight touched her. She took the chair by his bedside which had been set for her, and made inquiries after his health.

"Oh, I am better—much better," he answered hurriedly. "I shall cheat the doctors yet. But never mind me—tell me of yourself. Why have you come to your old guardian? Have you changed your mind about what I asked you, and have you come to tell me so?"

"Oh, no, no!" cried Helen, hastily withdrawing her hand from his, and colouring painfully. "How can you suppose me capable of such lack of modesty? Even if I had—as you suggest—changed my mind—which I could never, never do—I should at all events not be so unwomanly as to come to your house to tell you so."

The sick man's head fell back upon his pillows. The little flush of excitement faded quickly from his face. Helen, glancing apprehensively at him, saw that a grey pallor swept over his features at her words,

"Oh, do not be angry with me," she cried remorsefully.

"Angry? I can never be angry with you, child. I am only disappointed—so dreadfully disappointed," and then he sighed so deeply that it went to her heart.

There were a few moments of silence. Lord Bainton closed his eyes wearily, as though he had nothing more to say, and Helen felt painfully embarrassed. Presently she spoke again in a low and timid voice.

"May I not tell you why I have come to you, my dear, kind guardian?"

He opened his eyes again and smiled faintly at her. "To be sure. Tell me anything you like. Is my sister here too? I did not want her to know I had been ill, for, you see, I am nearly well again now, but ill news flies fast, and perhaps she has heard of it, and is in London?"

"No—Lady Camilla is not in Town. Dear Lord Bainton, I have a dreadful confession to make. I have left Oldpark. I came away alone, and without telling anybody. I crept out of the house when they were at dinner—nobody saw me go."

"You mean that you ran away? My dear child, but this is very serious! What induced you to take such an extraordinary step? Why, we must telegraph to Oldpark at once. Camilla will be frightened to death." He reached out his hand to the call-bell on the table by his side, but Helen laid her hand on his and stopped him.

"No, do not telegraph. Do not send to Lady Camilla. I will never go back to Oldpark. It is because I can no longer remain under your sister's care that I have come here—to throw myself upon your protection."

"Good Heavens, what has Camilla done to you? Were you not happy with her?"

"Perfectly, until she invited Frederick Warne to stay in the house, and tried to persuade me that it was my duty to marry him."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Lord Bainton, faintly.

"That is why," continued Helen, "I have come to you—for safety—for protection. Dear Lord Bainton, it cannot be my duty, can it, to marry a man I loathe and detest? You will not hand me over to him, will you?"

"My dearest child, of course not! Why, God bless my soul, what on earth can have possessed

Camilla to have that dreadful man in the house? How did he get there?"

"I do not know. Mrs. Torrington and I came up to London for one night three days ago. We came for some shopping she wanted to do, and to see a play, and when we got home again that man was in the house."

"Aha! that Torrington woman was in it, was she? I begin to understand. She and Camilla have been playing into each other's hands!"

"Mr. Warne seems to think he has a right to me."

"He has no right—none whatever."

"Of course, I did once promise to marry him, but I was very young, and it is a long time ago, and surely it cannot be my duty now——"

"Duty! I never heard of such a ridiculous idea! It is not a question of duty at all—besides, you cannot marry anybody till you are twenty-one without my consent. All that business goes for nothing—I told him so at the time. What on earth has put it into his head to presume to raise the subject again?"

"He has some letters of mine."

"The devil he has! What sort of letters? Love letters?"

"I am afraid they might be called so—not that I ever cared for him—but I was very young and friendless—and——"

"My dear, do not remind me of the years I left you at that school—left you to fall into such a miserable mistake as this engagement! If you only knew how bitterly I often reproach myself for it! My only excuse, Helen, is that I had not seen you for so long, I did not know what a sweet and charming young woman you had become! Still I can never forgive myself!"

"Dear Lord Bainton, do not distress yourself; it was not your fault, my engagement was my own doing—and these letters——"

"Can you not get them back? Have you not asked him for them?"

"Over and over again—but he will not give them up. I am afraid—it is a dreadful idea—but I am afraid he thinks he can make use of them—to bring an action against me."

Lord Bainton frowned heavily. "Whether or no he can do so, he can, at any rate, make himself exceedingly offensive to you and to me, my dear. We must see what money will do. I might be able to buy them back. I cannot permit you to be subjected to annoyance from this odious person's persecutions." Then suddenly turning towards her with a sad but infinitely tender smile: "Ah, my dear Helen," he added, "why will you not give me the right to protect you in the only efficient way possible against all troubles and worries of this nature?"

She made no answer. If only there had been no one else but Frederick Warne!

But there was that other secret fast locked in her heart—that other lover, whom she had deceived, and who had given her up, but whom she loved with her whole heart!

"I could have married Lord Bainton if I had never known Gilbert Nugent," she said to herself.

Then the nurse came into the room to put an end to her visit, and there was nothing more to be said. She crept away from the sick room softly and noiselessly, promising to come again and see him later on in the day.

"Think over what I say," he called out to her, as she went out.

She smiled and nodded, but said nothing as she closed the door.

Long after she had left him, the Earl lay quietly with closed eyes upon his bed, and the nurse thought that he was dozing. But his brain had never been more fully awake, nor his thoughts more

active. His anger against the underbred school-master who had dared to aspire to the woman he loved himself was very great, but his anger against his own sister, who, for the furtherance of her own very patent projects, had played into Warne's hands in so unscrupulous a manner, was far deeper and more bitter. His indignation against her was so great that to frustrate her artifices and to punish her for her treachery occupied the whole of his mind. The Earl of Bainton perhaps knew at his heart of hearts that his days on earth were numbered. "If anything were to happen to me," he said to himself, using mechanically that vague form of words concerning the only absolute certainty which existence holds for all of us—"If anything were to happen to me, what would become of her, and how can I best protect her against the jealousy and the avarice of those who will surround her?"

How was he to reach out his hands from beyond the grave to protect her for whom he experienced perhaps the first and only unselfish affection of his life.

The answer came to him slowly and after a long time. Then he sighed, and again he murmured half aloud to himself upon his bed :

"Yes—that would be the only way—she would be safe then from them all—but will she consent—will she consent?"

Mrs. Hogan, the nurse, bending down to catch the muttered words, fancied that his mind was wandering, but Lord Bainton had never been clearer-headed in his life.

"What was that?" he said presently, sharply and quite loudly.

"Nothing, my lord," replied the woman.

"Yes—it was the hall-door bell, and a cab has stopped at the door—somebody has come in. Ring the bell and inquire."

"It doesn't matter, my lord—they won't trouble you, whoever it is—and it's too early for the doctors yet. Davis won't admit any one else."

"I tell you someone is in the house—I hear voices in the room below—ring the bell and ask."

And the Earl, in spite of his weakened state and failing powers, was perfectly right, for downstairs in the room beneath, standing with his back to the fire upon the hearthrug, stood at that very moment no less a person than Mr. Frederick Warne—serene—self-important—and filled with a sublime confidence in himself and in the success of his errand.

CHAPTER XXV

MR. WARNE THREATENS.

"Thus repulsed, our final hope
Is flat despair."

—MILTON.

"HE called me his 'good fellow,'" said Davis with indignation afterwards in the dignified seclusion of the housekeeper's room, when relating how Mr. Warne had walked past and over him, literally and figuratively, into the library. "*Me*, as has lived with his lordship for twenty years! He asked if Miss Dacre was stopping here, and of course, having no occasion in my position of life to tell lies, I admitted that she was, but that she was out, and he says, 'Then I'll come in and wait till she returns,' and I says, 'No, sir, you can't, because what I mean is that Miss Dacre is "out" to visitors and she will certainly not see you, because the Earl is lying ill upstairs, and my orders is to admit no one but the doctors,' but I might as well have spoken to the wind, for he takes me by the shoulders and shoves me aside as if I was a paltry under-footman, and says, 'Stand out of my way, my good fellow, and go and tell Miss Dacre at once that I mean to stop here till I see her.'"

"Shameful!" ejaculated the sympathetic Mrs. Sims. "Whoever can he be?"

"He's no gentleman, anyhow," chimed in the cook. "And what did Miss Dacre do?"

"Why, she went as white as ashes—and she says—'Oh, don't let my guardian know, Davis; it will upset him so much—but perhaps I had better see the gentleman.'"

"Pretty creature, what a shame to trouble her! Some begging chap, I'll be bound he is!"

"Well, she gets up and goes out of the drawing-room down to the library door, and I says to her, 'Miss, if you should want anything, you just ring the bell loud and I'll come up at once,' and she nodded her head and went in, and there!—my stars! there goes the bell! I must be off!" and away hurried Davis as fast as his fat legs would carry him up the kitchen staircase.

Frederick Warne was fully convinced of the justice of his cause. He had come to Portman Square at Lady Camilla's suggestion, full of virtuous indignation. Helen's conduct was shameful and irrational, and he took no small credit to himself that he was still prepared to marry her in spite of it.

When she entered the library he met her with stern and angry reproaches.

"Unhappy girl!" he cried fixing his small weak eyes reprovingly upon her, and standing with his legs apart and his hands behind his coat-tails, in an attitude which had often reduced his pupils into trembling submission—"What have you done? Into what fatal position has your headstrong insubordination led you?"

"I really don't know what you mean, Mr. Warne," replied Helen quietly. "I am certainly unhappy, because my only friend on earth is lying very ill upstairs—but what there is 'fatal' in my position I fail to perceive."

"Then, indeed, you must have lost every womanly instinct if you cannot even see how you have imperilled your reputation by coming here."

"Mr. Warne, are you mad?"

"Do not interrupt me. Lady Camilla directed me to come here, hoping that we might discover your address, but neither she nor I could have conceived it possible that you would be actually staying in this house—alone—with no lady to protect you!"

"Why, where else could I stay with greater safety than under the roof of the guardian to whose care my father left me! What is there dreadful about it?"

"You fail to see? Here you are alone, with no protection, in the house of an unmarried man—a man too, who has not borne the best of names all his life with regard to women——"

"Be silent!" cried Helen, angrily. "How dare you insinuate disgraceful things against Lord Bainton? He has been goodness itself to me. I will not hear him maligned—besides!" and she laughed contemptuously, "at such a time as this, it is not only wicked, it is also ridiculous to say such things! Lord Bainton is very ill—he is in bed—there is a sick nurse in attendance."

"You have not seen him then?"

"Of course I have seen him."

Mr. Warne cast up his hands with a gesture of horror.

"Why should I not see him, pray? You seem to forget that he is an old man, and that he is in the position of a father to me!"

"Miserable girl!" cried the schoolmaster. "Are you indeed so ignorant and so lost to all sense of right and wrong that you do not understand what the world, what all good women, will say of your position here? A man who is no relation to you is protected neither by age nor by illness. Lord

Bainton knows this well enough! Did he not have a married lady as a chaperone to travel with you when he took you abroad? What will be said of you if you persist in casting aside the decencies and proprieties of life? My dear Helen, I entreat you to do what is right before it is too late, and your rash and inconsiderate step has become known and commented on. Come down at once to Aberdare House, to the protection of my dear aunt. I will not even go with you—take some woman servant from this house—or I will telegraph to my aunt, and, old as she is, I know she will come up by the very first train and fetch you away; believe me, you cannot stay here!”

For a moment or two Helen was staggered. What he said to her was very terrible. She had not thought of it before in this light—was it indeed true that she was risking her good name by remaining in her guardian’s house?—that women would speak lightly of her by reason of it?

Then quickly there came another thought.

“If I do as you wish,” she said, “will you cease to persecute me to marry you? Will you release me from my engagement and give me back my letters?”

Frederick Warne laughed contemptuously.

“I shall make no bargain of that kind, Helen. Your letters are too precious to me. I cannot give them up.”

Then Helen saw instantly that no compromise was possible. She perceived that all this fine talk about her reputation and her anomalous position in the house of her guardian meant nothing at all but a scheme to get her away from the protection which Portman Square afforded her, in order to place her once more in that hated prison of her girlhood, under influences which might perhaps induce her to marry this man against her will.

She saw at once that Frederick Warne’s cove-

tousness would not suffer him to give up his claim upon her; he did not care about her good name—that was a mere trumped up bogey to frighten her; what he did care about was her fortune, and his own chances of getting hold of it.

With this conviction her courage rose; she shook off the disturbance his cruel words had caused her, and confronted him once more.

“Mr. Warne,” she said very quietly, “it seems to me that this matter is a question of money. How much will you take to give me back my letters?”

“You insult me, Helen!”

“Not so much as you insult me. I am willing to pay you or at any rate Lord Bainton is willing to do so.”

“Pay me! I never heard of such a thing—how can anything repay a man for his wounded affections and disappointed hopes?”

“We will leave your affections out of the question, if you please.”

“Helen, you wrong me! indeed you do. I have the deepest and sincerest feelings for you, and if I spoke of bringing an action against you, it is not that I wish to carry things to that length, but that I hope you will yield to me before you force me into a proceeding which would be most distasteful to me. It is not, as you imply, a question of money, it is a question of principle—it is for your own good that I long to take you out of this life of fashion and of folly, and I may add of actual danger, back to the safe sphere of sobriety and usefulness in which my aunt so carefully brought you up.”

At that moment, Frederick Warne honestly believed himself to be actuated by the most disinterested motives.

“I will make you a good husband,” he continued almost plaintively, “indeed I will; you shall never have cause to regret——”

“We will not discuss this subject any more,”

interrupted Helen hastily, "I shall never be your wife—but I feel and know that I have treated you rather badly, and that I owe you some reparation—if you will give me back those letters, and allow the subject to drop, you shall be paid. Beyond that I can say nothing, and also I must absolutely refuse to see you again."

"That is nonsense," and this time Frederick Warne lost his temper and spoke angrily and roughly. "I shall bring my aunt here to-morrow, she will perhaps be able to bring you to your senses, and to a realization of your duty——"

"This is intolerable!" cried Helen, and with a rapid movement across the room she rang the bell loudly. "Miss Fairbrother will not be so ill-advised, I hope, as to attempt to enter my guardian's house upon such an errand!"

"Miss Fairbrother has courage enough to enter any house in a righteous and excellent cause," retorted her tormentor hotly.

"Davis, show this gentleman to the door," was Helen's only reply as the respectable form of the butler, panting a little from the speed with which he had responded to her summons, appeared upon the scene.

Casting a look of rage and malice at the girl's white and angry face, Mr. Frederick Warne took up his hat and went.

He would perhaps have been consoled could he have looked back into the room and seen Helen five minutes after his departure.

Face downwards upon the sofa the girl lay sobbing as if her heart would break; never had utter despair and loneliness so overwhelmed her before. It is true that she had never been loved and cared for as other girls; all her life long she had been ignorant of that tender affection which shelters the early years of most young creatures—she had always been thrown upon strangers, and

her warm heart had longed in vain for sympathy and comprehension, but there had come to her, at last, that wonderful change in her fortunes which had transfigured her whole life, and for a brief space she had deluded herself into believing that her money had procured for her the love and the friendship for which she had always pined so intensely. But now a rude awakening had come to her, and she saw herself surrounded on every side not by friends, but by foes. Avarice, cruelty, and treachery, were what her money had earned for her, and it was small wonder that she felt herself to be helpless and almost hopeless amongst the hideous passions of those who were ready to sacrifice her to their own ends and ambitions.

She had only one friend in the world—only one who cared for her, for herself, and was ready to help and stand by her—that sick man upstairs upon his bed! Everyone else had forsaken, or been false to her, she had no other hope on earth save in him.

After a time her tears ceased to flow, and she lay quite still with clasped hands, and her great sorrowful eyes gazed blankly and miserably out into the sombre half-lit room. Now and again, as a thought of the man she had loved and whose faith and trust she had lost for ever crossed her mind, she shivered a little.

"If I had only been braver," she moaned aloud once, "if I had only told him the truth, but it is all over now—all over," and then she lay very still again. She had no hope from that quarter—she did not know even where he was, and if she had known she would not have applied to him. She believed that Gilbert Nugent was a man who would never forgive a lie from the woman he loved—it was the unpardonable sin, no doubt in his eyes—and she had committed it!

After what seemed to her a very, very long time

—although it was, in fact, little more than half-an-hour—she rose from the sofa and rang the bell, she felt weak and cold, and her limbs ached—it was as if she had been very ill.

When Davis came to the door, he was shocked by her pale and altered looks.

“I want to speak to the Earl—will you please go and ask the nurse when I can see him.”

“You will have some dinner first, Miss, won’t you? You look so tired.”

“No—very well, yes—I will eat something, but go and find out first when Lord Bainton will see me—say I must speak to him to-night before I go to bed.”

Presently Davis came back to tell her that his master would see her in an hour’s time. “I will bring you something to eat at once, Miss,” he added as he left the room.

And Helen sat down and waited, with much the same feeling, perhaps, as a condemned criminal awaits his execution.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MRS. DELASTAIR’S ADVICE.

“And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain.”

—COLERIDGE.

GILBERT NUGENT, up in Yorkshire, was not enjoying his visit to the Delastairs’ in the very least. It is true that the sport was excellent, and that he himself was shooting in his best form, true also that the party staying in the house was congenial and agreeable to him, whilst as for the house itself, it was what it always had been—the most charming house in England. The host and hostess were the soul of hospitality, the cook was faultless, the wine undeniable, and every arrangement both indoors and out, so admirably carried

out, that nothing was left to be desired. Surely a man must be difficult to please indeed, who could not make himself thoroughly happy at Holmby Hall! Yet, in spite of all this, Nugent was certainly miserable.

He was preoccupied and absent, and often in the midst of the most animated conversation, he remained silent and abstracted, his thoughts miles away from what was going on about him. His host rallied him frequently upon his low spirits, and the other guests in the house told each other that Nugent was no longer the cheery and delightful companion of old days, and that evidently some trouble or annoyance weighed upon his mind.

"When a man is out of gear, it's generally his liver that is out of order," opined old Colonel Wortley, who had been in India for many years and knew by experience what a curse a man's liver may be to him.

"Or more likely it's money," suggested a subaltern on long leave, whose Christmas bills were still following him perseveringly about the country from house to house, spoiling his daily appetite for breakfast by their matutinal persistency.

"Or perhaps it may be love," remarked a young lady, who had gone through an unlucky love affair herself, and felt a kindred sympathy for all those similarly affected.

"It is probably a mixture of all three," said Mr. Delastair with a laugh. "Clara," turning to his wife, "can you not unravel the mystery concerning our friend? You, who are the acknowledged *confidante* of all young men and maidens in distress?"

Mrs. Delastair, a sweet-faced, fair-haired woman, with a gentle manner and an air of refinement, that more than replaced in her any claim to beauty, looked up with a smile.

"If Mr. Nugent wants my sympathy, Henry, you may be quite sure that he will receive it. Perhaps, poor fellow, the cause of his trouble is not difficult to guess!" and everybody knew at once that Mrs. Delastair was alluding to the unfortunate influence of Mrs. Torrington over Gilbert Nugent's life—for there were very few people in society who had not heard or seen for themselves, how complete a slave the unhappy young man had been for years to that undesirable little person.

Gilbert Nugent entering the room at this moment, the conversation came naturally to an abrupt conclusion; but that same evening, after dinner, Mrs. Delastair, finding herself by chance sitting upon the same sofa with Nugent in a retired corner of the large drawing-room, found the courage to say to her guest:

"What is the matter with you, Mr. Nugent? Henry and I think you seem in such bad spirits. I trust nothing is amiss with you?"

Nugent was startled out of a reverie of his own, and looked up quickly at his hostess. Mrs. Delastair had such a gentle voice and such a sweet, womanly face that those in trouble often felt themselves impelled, as though by an irresistible magnetism, to confide in her. She was trustworthy too; she never betrayed a confidence or took advantage of a moment of weakness. Her husband used to say of her, laughingly:

"Clara is the recipient of half the confessions of woe in England, but I never can get any of them out of her! She can hold her tongue—which is more than most women can do—even to her own husband."

So perhaps it was no wonder that Gilbert, who had always liked and respected her, found himself answering with a groan:

"Everything is amiss with me, Mrs. Delastair."

"Tell me your trouble, Mr. Nugent," she replied softly. "Perhaps I may be able to help you; or, at any rate, it may relieve your mind to talk it over with me. Is it—is it—forgive me if I am indiscreet—is it the old tie?"

"Yes, to a great extent. Oh, Mrs. Delastair, you have no conception what a dreadful burden it is!"

"Why not be a man and break through it? Why don't you find some nice, good girl and marry her?"

"Ah, that is just the worst of it," and then he told her how he had fallen in love with such a girl, and how, for her sake, he had determined to free himself from his false position with regard to Mrs. Torrington, because he believed that his love was returned—but how the girl he loved was false, and had told him a lie—how she herself had a past that was not without a story, and was bound by an undesirable engagement which she had kept a secret from him, and which he had suddenly discovered—and that how, because she had told him what was not true, he had left her for ever. Yet he could not forget her, and he was utterly wretched, though he supposed there was nothing for it but to go on in the same miserable way—perhaps indeed he had better marry Dora Torrington at once and have done with it. Perhaps he owed it to her, poor woman, to clear her name from scandal—perhaps that would be the best thing to do.

"Pray do nothing of the kind, Mr. Nugent. There can be no object to be gained by making yourself miserable for the rest of your life," interrupted Mrs. Delastair with energy. "And don't you think that it would be braver and more manly if you were to free yourself from this yoke?"

"What would be the good of it? I have lost the other."

"It always seems to me to make difficult things

simpler if we leave out considerations of that kind—if we do what is right—simply because it *is* right, and not because of any results that may or may not happen.”

Nugent was silent. Had not Helen said something of the kind to him too, when he had asked her advice on the night of the ball?

“Would it be right, do you think?” he asked doubtfully, after a few minutes of reflection.

“Certainly it would be right.”

“But for Dora Torrington. Remember I am an old friend of hers.”

“Be her old friend still—but do not be her slave. You have just confessed to me that you love another woman, whom you wished to make your wife, how then can you in the same breath talk of marrying Mrs. Torrington?”

“But there might be a duty towards her—it might be a kindness.”

“It would be kinder to her to remove yourself entirely out of her way, and it can never be a man’s duty, save under most exceptional cases, to marry a woman he does not love.”

“I believe you are right—but—what do you advise me to do?”

“Write to her to-morrow, put things in plain words, refuse to see her again.”

“But she will not consent. She pretends that I am bound by my honour to remain unmarried for three more years—she has a letter of mine.”

“This is all nonsense, Mr. Nugent. If you cannot get rid of the woman in any other way, go abroad at once. She cannot follow you across the seas.”

For a minute or two he made no reply, and then he sighed rather wearily.

“I believe you are right,” he said once more. “You were always right, Mrs. Delastair, but it is a miserable look-out for me.”

"Because you are spoilt, my dear fellow. You have been made too much of at home. Go to the other side of the world and rough it a little. You speak of this girl, who you say had a story in her past and who disappointed your expectations. Who are you, and what has your past been, that you should judge her so hardly? That is so like a man! However disreputable his own life has been, he has never any allowance to make for the errors of the woman he honours with his preference."

"She told me a lie," he said gloomily.

"That was very wrong, of course. But are you sure you did not drive her into it? Can you feel certain that there were not excuses to be made for her? I daresay she is dreadfully sorry for it now. I daresay she is very unhappy, and I am sure you are. You will find that some day you will have to forgive her for that untruth."

"Very likely she would not forgive me for condemning her so readily."

"Very likely not. But you must give her time. You must prove your own sincerity first by clearing your own life of all that is discreditable. I don't consider you will be worthy of any girl, however faulty she may be, until you have done that. You will forgive me for speaking plainly, will you not? I am a plain-spoken woman, you know."

"You are the best and kindest woman on earth, Mrs. Delastair," said Nugent warmly, and then he got up and held out his hand to her. "If you will excuse me, I will wish you good-night now. I want to go to my own room and think over what you have said quietly. Do you know that you have given me back two things that I thought I had lost entirely?—a little self-respect and a little hope!"—and then he wished her good-night and slipped quietly out of the room.

He was happier that night than he had been for

a long time. To begin with, Mrs. Delastair had encouraged and strengthened him. Gilbert was very easily swayed either for good or for evil, and a thoroughly upright and conscientious influence was never without its corresponding effect upon his mobile nature—and then, she had not condemned Helen Dacre hopelessly. She had spoken of her as a good girl. She had made excuses for her fault and had suggested that she, at any rate, was less blameworthy than himself. All this comforted and cheered him. Perhaps, after all, Helen had been frightened and coerced. Perhaps she had been so hard driven that she had sinned, not through deliberation, but through weakness. Now that the first brunt of his anger was over, he began to make excuses for her—to admit that her conduct had not succeeded in destroying his love and longing for her, and to see that, as Mrs. Delastair had told him, the day would probably come when he should be able to forgive her fully and freely.

That very night he wrote his letter to Dora Torrington; he sat up half the night writing it, and he tore up a great many sheets of paper in the doing of it. For it was not an easy letter to write. It is never easy for a man who has once professed to love a lady, to back out of those professions and to inform her that he loves her no longer. There is, perhaps, no position on earth which a man feels to be more uncomfortable and untenable. It is true that in this case Gilbert had already paved the way by the most outspoken statement of his change of sentiment, but as Dora had always utterly refused to accept the resignation which he had vainly endeavoured to tender to her, he had found himself, after all his efforts, not one whit advanced in the struggle for freedom which he had already made. But now he was resolved that he would indeed be free; and his letter was couched in words that spoke this resolution with almost a

brutal plainness. In fact, to make it clear enough, he was obliged to be brutal—and naturally he hated himself for being so. Over and over again during the course of that dreadful night, his evil angel reminded him of Dora Torrington's devotion to him, of the years she had clung to him, of the fascination she had exercised over him in the early days of their acquaintance, and over and over again he laid down his pen and said to himself aloud, "I cannot do it! I cannot be such a brute to her! I have made my fate, and I must continue to endure it!" And it was only the recollection of Mrs. Delastair's sensible advice, and the secret hope that by following it he might perhaps some day live to be loved again by Helen Dacre, which kept him from throwing aside his self-imposed task in hopeless despair.

The morning light was creeping greyly through the chinks in the shutters of his room before that letter was finished and addressed and fastened up, and when at length he flung himself upon his bed he was thoroughly worn out both in mind and in body.

He soon fell into a deep and dreamless slumber, and when he awoke and saw the letter lying addressed and sealed upon his table he felt as though the weight of a great trouble had been lifted from his heart. When it was actually posted he was happier still, and enjoyed his shooting that day more thoroughly than he had done since his arrival, for his easy-going nature persuaded itself that all would now be plain sailing. He would be free—free to go where he pleased, to do as he liked, and to begin a new and better life.

He even found himself day-dreaming about Helen Dacre; a keen recollection of her adorable charm returned to him, making his pulses beat quicker and his hopes rise high. Mrs. Delastair had told him that he would have to forgive her—

that she was probably much less to blame than he had fancied, and that her sin had not been unpardonable. He would seek her out—he would forgive her—there should be a reconciliation between them; for is not “making it up” the most delightful task in life to two people who love each other? and Gilbert told himself that he would seal his forgiveness upon the sweetest lips in the world!—and then—and then——! Oh, how could he ever be grateful enough to Mrs. Delastair for making him write that letter?

Perhaps, however, it would have damped Gilbert Nugent’s good spirits considerably could he have known that, as far as Helen Dacre was concerned, he had penned that letter at Mrs. Delastair’s instigation exactly twenty-four hours too late!

CHAPTER XXVII.

HARSH JUDGMENTS.

“ . . . Contempt,
Dispraise or blame.”

—MILTON.

IN the great gloomy mansion in Portman Square there reigned an intense, although curiously suppressed excitement.

It was in the air; from the lowest cellar to the highest attic the atmosphere was pervaded with it; it seemed to permeate into every room of the house, and there was not a servant, from the great Mr. Davis down to Sally, the under kitchen-girl, who was not full of it.

There was a coming and a going all the morning through the front door, bells that rang incessantly, footsteps that hurried constantly across the black and white flagstones of the hall and up the softly-carpeted staircase. The noises, though incessant, were not loud; there was a hushed

solemnity about it all—almost, it might be said, a shocked solemnity.

The morning tradesmen saw that there was something the matter when they came to the basement door upon their rounds, and glanced anxiously up at the windows to see whether by chance the blinds were pulled down—but no, the Earl was presumably alive, for there were no signs of funereal woe about the outer aspect of the house. Yet strange and unwonted visitors were passing in and out of it, and it was plain that something very unusual was taking place within.

There was, for instance, Mr. Scarsdale, the family lawyer, who dashed up at an early hour to the door in a hansom, and who went away again, after a brief visit, as rapidly as he came—only to return in an hour's time accompanied by his confidential clerk and a large shiny black leather bag. Then came the doctors, one after the other first, and then, later on, both together again, and lastly a visitor who was not often seen within Lord Bainton's doors—the vicar of the parish!

All these gentlemen went upstairs on their arrival, and were conducted straight into the Earl's sick room, where the door was mysteriously shut upon them.

Meanwhile, in the dressing-room, which communicated with Lord Bainton's bed-chamber, some very extraordinary proceedings were taking place. Here might be seen Mrs. Sims, the housekeeper, superintending and directing the operations of a bevy of maid servants. It was a large room, as large as the bedroom itself, and before long it underwent a complete transformation. After a course of scrubbing and sweeping and dusting, which lasted for the better part of an hour, Mrs. Sims gave orders that all that appertained to the toilet should be removed or hidden from sight. Straightway, the washing-stand and its belongings vanished, the

large bath was concealed by a high handsome Japanese screen, and wardrobes, boot cupboards and chests of drawers were so draped and transmogrified by Eastern embroideries that their original shape and purpose become unrecognizable.

Then a table, covered by a gold and crimson cloth, was set up in the centre of the room, and, all being now prepared for the last touches, a quantity of the most beautiful flowers were brought in from the cart of the most expensive florist in London, that was standing at the front door, and from it, in spite of the inclemency of the winter morning, a perfect parterre of hothouse flowers and a forest of foliage plants were quickly conveyed into the house and upstairs into the Earl's dressing-room.

It was at last a dressing-room no longer. It was a lady's bower—a festal chamber—or, better simile still, a chapel decorated and adorned for a great and joyful occasion.

All this time, down in the basement, the cook and her assistants were also hard at work.

A luncheon was to be ready at two o'clock—a luncheon of such a *recherché* nature that it should be a veritable triumph of the culinary art. This meal was to be served upstairs also, in a little unused room, on the same floor as Lord Bainton's bedroom and dressing-room, that was on the opposite side of the landing.

“And to think,” exclaimed the cook, as she stood up to her eyes in the midst of her saucepans and stewpots, “to think that, after all these years and years I've lived with him, his lordship should have only given me only four hours' notice to prepare for such an event as this! I call it downright cruel—that I do! How is a decent cook to keep up her credit all in such a hurry as this I should like to know?”

All this time Helen Dacre sat by herself in her

own little room, on a higher storey of the house. The morning was cold and raw, and Helen, after sending away almost untasted the breakfast which had been brought up to her on a tray, sat down shivering by the side of the fire.

Presently she too began to receive visitors—Sir Augustus Rolls being the first person to request an interview with her.

Helen rose slowly to her feet as the eminent physician entered her little sitting-room.

She was pale and weary, and her eyes were dull and lustreless. She looked as if she had not slept all night, and, naturally enough, her appearance had suffered considerably.

Sir Augustus, as he came in, glanced at her sternly and coldly, and he said to himself, as he did so, "She is not even pretty—What on earth can be the attraction?"

He bowed to her coldly, and took the chair which she pushed forward for him, and then he cleared his throat and looked straight into the fire. What he had to say to her was not either pleasant or easy to say.

"Miss Dacre," he began awkwardly enough, "I have requested you to grant me this interview because I conceive it to be my duty to speak to you most seriously." He waited for a minute, and then Helen said slowly and enquiringly:

"Yes."

There was another pause.

"You will, I daresay, understand the unbounded surprise—the absolute shock—I may say, with which I received, at a very early hour this morning, the intimation of Lord Bainton's most extraordinary intentions."

Again Helen said only "Yes?" with a little accent of enquiry, nothing more.

"Of course," continued Sir Augustus, lashing himself up into a little burst of indignation, "no conscientious or honourable physician could receive

such a communication concerning a patient in whom he is interested, without being deeply concerned and distressed."

As this remark did not seem to require an answer, Helen said nothing. She was standing by the mantelpiece with her elbow leaning upon it, and her face upon her hand. She looked very, very tired, and there was something almost apathetic in the droop of her slender figure and in the downward curves of her sad mouth. Sir Augustus, looking up at her sharply, wondered for a moment whether she had even heard what he was saying to her. He spoke even a little more brusquely than before in consequence.

"Of course, Miss Dacre, you are a perfect stranger to me, and perhaps you may think that my conduct savours of interference, but I have my patient to think of, and whatever may be your motives in this matter, I think it is my duty to him, to warn you most solemnly against what you are about to do."

Helen lifted her head slowly and looked at him.

"Why?" she asked wonderingly, whilst a slow red flush crept over her face.

"Because Lord Bainton is the victim of a mortal complaint, from which it is quite impossible that he can ever recover."

She was startled; she clasped her hands together with a sudden gesture of dismay.

"Oh, no," she cried with agitation; "do not say so! It cannot be true!"

"It *is* true. I do not say that he will die to-day or to-morrow, or even this year, but his life cannot be protracted for very long, even with the greatest care. Now that I have spoken to you plainly," he continued, rising in his chair, "I trust you will pause before it is too late, and that you will refuse to consent to take a step which can bring to you nothing but trouble and sorrow."

"Oh, but you mistake me entirely! What you tell me can only make me ten-fold more determined to do what I can for him as long as his life is spared."

Sir Augustus shrugged his shoulders and took up his hat from the table—it was evident that he did not believe her.

"It is not for me to be the judge of your motives, young lady; if you have no friends to advise you better, I am sorry for you; in any case I have delivered my own conscience, and you can never say that I neglected to warn you. I have the honour to wish you good morning." And then he bowed to her again very coldly and stiffly and left the room.

"A heartless, mercenary creature!" he said to himself as he went quickly downstairs, "ready to sell herself to a dying man, and turn herself into a sick nurse for the sake of his title! Such hardened worldliness in one so young is positively disgusting."

It never entered Helen's mind to imagine that anyone would judge her so hardly or attribute such base motives to her. After the doctor was gone, she wondered a little why he had been so harsh and rough to her, and why he had told her such a dreadful thing about her guardian so brutally and unsympathetically, and shed a few tears over what he had said.

"I suppose," she thought to herself, in extenuation of his unkindness, "that the constant sight of so much suffering hardens a doctor's heart in time; they can't be expected, I daresay, to feel for individual sorrows. How could he suppose that I should be so selfish as to draw back now, just because Lord Bainton may not live very long?"

Presently, however, Helen received another visitor, who also said to her some strange and not altogether pleasant things.

This was Mr. Scarsdale, the solicitor. He was a white-headed little gentleman, with spectacles on

his nose, and a perpetual smile on his thin lips, that imparted a certain amount of nervous amiability to his manner.

He came in smiling and bowing and rubbing his hands together in quite a friendly fashion, and Helen thought at first that she liked him much better than Sir Augustus Rolls. But before his visit was over she had reason to change her mind. Mr. Scarsdale began by expressing himself with great delight at making her acquaintance; he called her his "dear young lady," and said that he hoped they should be the best of friends, and then he sat down and pulled off his gloves and smiled at her quite affectionately.

"You know, my dear Miss Dacre," he then remarked, quite unexpectedly, "you know I can't let you do this, my dear, you mustn't think of it!—no, don't interrupt me," as Helen, in extreme surprise, was about to answer him, "you must just listen to me. Of course, you are young, and you don't understand these things—how should you? But there are family considerations, my dear Miss Dacre, family considerations of the—very—highest—importance!" and Mr. Scarsdale brought out his words one by one with a little jerk as though to impress them upon her mind.

"I do not understand," began Helen.

"No, no, of course not! that is just what I say. How should a young and charming young lady be expected to understand? But you take my word for it, my dear, it mustn't be done, it mustn't be done!" and Mr. Scarsdale shook a lean and bony forefinger playfully at her.

"*What* musn't be done, Mr. Scarsdale?" she asked in bewilderment.

"Ha, ha! as if you did not know! Ah, these secrets can't be kept from the lawyer, you know! and when settlements are to be drawn up on a magnificent scale and wills are to be made——"

"Settlements! Wills!" repeated Helen, turning upon him a pale and startled face.

"And natural heirs set aside, all for the sake of one charming young lady—why then I say it mustn't be done—it mustn't indeed!"

An inkling of his meaning broke suddenly into her puzzled mind, and with it a great dismay. She sprang from her chair and confronted him breathlessly.

"Explain to me at once, Mr. Scarsdale, and in as few words as possible, what you mean to imply. Has Lord Bainton, in consequence of his intentions with regard to me, made a new will? Is that what you mean to say?"

"He has directed me to prepare his will—an unjust will—Miss Dacre. Of course, my dear young lady, I do not object to a settlement in your favour—in reason—in reason! but when it comes to sweeping measures—to cutting out altogether the name of his nephew and heir, young Mr. Greyson."

"*Ted!*" gasped Helen below her breath. Ted, who had been good to her, who had taught her to ride, who had stood by her! Could she ever forget his honest ugly face, or bring evil upon the head of the boyish friend to whom she had shown a sister's affection?

"That will do, Mr. Scarsdale," she said, suddenly turning towards him, "I am much obliged to you for telling me; you need say no more."

"And you will prevent Lord Bainton from carrying out this intention of his?"

"I shall do what I think right," she answered with some dignity. "Please leave me."

And Mr. Scarsdale went.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MAY AND DECEMBER.

“With mirth in funeral, and dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole.”

—SHAKESPEARE.

WHAT Helen Dacre had done or had not done, was not known either to Sir Augustus Rolls or Mr. Scarsdale, when, rather more than two hours later, they stood side by side in the profusely decorated dressing-room opening out of Lord Bainton's bed-chamber, as witnesses to the strangest marriage ceremony which it had ever fallen to the lot of either of them to be present at.

The clergyman in his canonical robes with a prayer-book in his hand, stood on the further side of the table, and the bride, in a dark cloth winter gown, bearing an enormous bouquet of hot-house flowers in her trembling hands, stood before him. The servants had filed in in a long procession, and stood grouped about the door, and from the open door of the bedroom beyond, a wheeled Bath-chair was being slowly pushed forward by his lordship's valet, whilst Mr. Wright, his doctor, walked by the side of it, steadying it with his hands as it advanced towards the impromptu altar.

The Earl had been carefully dressed and shaved for the occasion, but although a flush of excitement lit up his thin face, the ravages which illness had made in his appearance were dreadfully apparent. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes cavernous, and his lower jaw seemed to have fallen a little away. He looked a good ten years older than his real age, whilst the brilliant flowery-patterned satin dressing-gown in which he was dressed, the spotless

collar and cuffs, the glittering diamond horse-shoe pin in his satin scarf, only served to make his decrepitude and infirmity more conspicuous and more terrible. Helen, glancing at him as he was brought in, could not repress an involuntary shudder—she turned deadly pale for a moment, she tottered a little, and had to put out her hand to the edge of the table to steady herself—and all the while she felt that Sir Augustus's cold and disapproving eyes were fixed upon her with a scorn which almost amounted to disgust!

It seemed to her, for a moment, that she could not go through with it, that she could not possibly bring herself to sacrifice her youth and her happiness to this old man who was already, as the physician had told her, under the irrevocable doom of a mortal disease.

But in Helen's mind there was only one alternative. A stronger nature than hers might have known how to strike clear from what, in her eyes, constituted a hopeless predicament. A woman with a greater knowledge of the world, coupled with a firmer self-reliance, would have seen her way to a better and wiser way out of her troubles—she would have said to herself that, having that all-compelling power, the power of money, in her possession, it was possible for her to do all things—to cut the Gordian knot of her difficulties—to face life alone and unaided, to carve a new career for herself, to free herself from the meshes in which she was now entangled, and, in short, to make herself independent both of the schemes and the claims of those about her.

But such vigorous measures did not lie within the scope of Helen's yielding and somewhat timid nature. Courage with her was but an evanescent quality, not to be reckoned upon in an emergency. She had never been taught to be independent of others, and it did not occur to her to think that it

would be possible to her to stand alone. She was of that essentially loving and clinging nature of which the tenderest wives and mothers are made, but which does not count for much in the composition of a heroine. She longed for affection, for the security of a home, and for the protection of some one whose right and whose pleasure it would be to shelter her safely against the coldness and the cruelty she had met with in the world.

A natural and physical repulsion, indeed, made her tremble at this supreme crisis of her fate, when she looked at the bridegroom into whose arms fate seemed to have driven her—it was the shrinking of youth from age—the repugnance of May for December. Yet almost immediately she overcame the sensation, for she was sincerely attached to Lord Bainton and, moreover, she reminded herself of the alternative. When she thought about Frederick Warne and his repulsive priggishness, of his claims, of his threats to enforce them, and of her own powerlessness to repel him, and when she remembered on the other hand a certain interview, not an hour ago, with this old man who wished to make her his wife; his kindness, his affection, his readiness in agreeing to all her requests, and his deep and unfeigned gratitude to her, for her compliance with his wishes, her courage came back to her once more.

“After all,” she said to herself, “I have no one else on earth but him. He loves me, and I am necessary to his happiness—no one else wants me, or cares whether I live or die. And if these men, the doctors and the lawyer, do believe me to be base and mercenary, what does that matter, since he knows better, and we understand one another?”

When the Bath-chair reached her side, Lord Bainton stretched out to her a withered, claw-like hand, that seemed to be only half its normal size. She grasped it firmly and encouragingly in hers,

and then, emboldened by this signal of love and confidence, she raised her head and met the physician's eyes defiantly and bravely.

"You do not understand," her eyes seemed to say. "You are suspicious and cruel!"

But to Sir Augustus Rolls they failed to convey their message, and he only said to himself:

"Brazen-faced girl! She glories in her shameful position."

The clergyman, who, for certain, was no more in sympathy with her than the rest, coughed drily behind his fingers as a sign that he was ready, and the service began,

In a very few seconds, for, in consideration of the bridegroom's health the formulary was as much abridged as possible, John Edward Ravenstoke had consented to take Helen Grace to his wedded wife, and almost inaudibly, Helen Grace had in turn assented to take John Edward Ravenstoke to her wedded husband. Mr. Wright, who had stationed himself by her side, had given the bride away, and with the gold ring upon her finger, they had both once more in turn plighted their marriage vows.

"Till Death us do part!" The words rang out ominously and with an unusual solemnity into the silence of the room, and there was not one of those present who did not say in his heart:

"And how soon will not that be?"

Perhaps the Earl himself was the only one to whom the message of Death, inscribed so plainly to the eyes of the lookers-on upon his altered face, did not come home with an awful conviction. For him alone, for one blissful moment, joy and content absorbed all fears for the future—all terrors of that dread Unknown that already had knocked at his door.

As he held out his hands to his young wife, upon the closing words of the service, and drew her face fondly down towards his own, he cried joyfully:

"Now I shall get well again! now I shall soon be strong!—thanks to you my brave and noble darling! Scarsdale," turning suddenly to the lawyer, "did you see about those diamonds from the bank? Are they here? Bring them at once—they are my wedding-present to you, my love. Give them to me quickly, that I may clasp them myself round Lady Bainton's neck."

Helen flushed painfully at the sound of her new name.

Scarsdale handed two large leather jewel-cases to the Earl from a locked bag which he had brought with him. Helen knelt down by the old man's side, and with trembling hands he threw a magnificent necklace of diamonds about her neck, and placed a tiara in the shape of a coronet upon her dark hair.

"There! is she not handsome? my bride, my queen!" he exclaimed in delight. "Now let us get to lunch. Oh, yes, Rolls, I am going to lunch with you of course—don't come preaching to me if you please on my wedding-day! Mr. Venner," to the clergyman who had married them, "give Lady Bainton your arm, and take her into the next room; here, Wright, you walk by me, and you, gentlemen," turning to the others, "please follow us; you must all be hungry, I am sure, and luncheon, I see, is quite ready."

The servants had flung open the the doors between the two rooms and stood in a line on either side, as the Vicar led the way with Helen upon his arm. The glittering diamonds round her neck and upon her head looked strangely wierd and out of place upon her dark cloth gown, in the cold light of the winter day.

Scarcely, however, had she reached the door of the other room, when there was a scream and a sudden rush behind her, and she turned quickly round, just in time to see Lord Bainton falling back

heavily in his chair and the doctors hurrying to his assistance.

With a cry of dismay she flew back again—the servants were running along the passage—Sir Augustus was issuing authoritative orders—the wheeled chair was shot back into the bedroom behind.

“Go away, Lady Bainton,” said Sir Augustus, pushing her roughly back. “You can do no good here—stand back,”

“I will not go. I have a right to be here—it is my place. Oh God! is he dead?”

For a moment it seemed indeed as though he were. He lay back perfectly lifeless, with closed eyes and his face had become ashen grey.

The doctors applied restoratives. Helen kept her place, holding one of the inanimate hands and chafing it between her own, that were almost as cold and numb as his.

Sir Augustus did not tell her again to go away; probably even at this moment of painful anxiety he had time to recognize the justice of her refusal, and to see that he had no right to banish a wife from her husband's side.

Presently he looked up at her across the lifeless man, his hand was upon his heart.

“He is not dead,” he said to her, in a low voice, with more deference than he had yet shown to her. “His heart is beating again. It is one of the attacks he has had before. He will come to presently. Everything depends upon keeping him quiet. If you will go in to your lunch, Lady Bainton, I will come to you as soon as I can leave him, and tell you how he is.”

She obeyed him without a word. Mr. Scarsdale and Mr. Venner accompanied her. The servants made way for her to pass in awestruck silence.

The sick room was cleared of all but the doctors and necessary attendants, and the door was shut to.

Helen moved mechanically to the head of the table and sank down into a chair. As she did so, she caught a passing glimpse of herself in the long mirror between the windows.

The sight of her own pale and terrified face, her head crowned with the tiara, and her throat encircled with the festooned clusters of glittering stones, struck a chill shock of horror through her heart. The mockery of it all—of her own appearance, of the table before her, laid out as for a feast, decked with shining silver and glass, and crowded with dainty dishes that no one was there to eat, with masses of hothouse flowers lying in long garlands amongst them—gorgeous purple and gold orchids, sprays of waxen-white stephanotis, and delicate maidenhair fronds with their tender greenery flung across the flowers—all became to her all at once—no longer the emblems of a wedding feast, but of a tragedy—a tragedy of which she herself was the centre and the heroine! With a low cry of pain, she put up her shaking hands to unclasp the jewels from her throat and hair.

“Help me, help me!” she cried piteously turning to the clergyman who stood by her side, whilst her trembling fingers struggled vainly with the clasps and fastenings of her ill-fated bridal gifts. “Please—please help me to take them off! He is not here to see me, and I cannot wear them any longer—they hurt me so. Oh, they hurt me!”

Mr. Venner, although he, like the rest, believed that she had sold herself from the basest of motives to a dying man, could not, in common humanity, refuse her his assistance, nor could he refrain, as he did so, from speaking a few kindly common-places, and he murmured some not very coherent sentences about the Earl’s probable recovery, and her own need of strength and patience.

There was little enough in the words—in his own ears indeed they sounded very cold and un-

sympathetic, for the circumstances were exceptional, and the good man hardly knew what to say ; but the poor child was so utterly lonely and wretched that, with an unexpected gush of gratitude, which considerably surprised him, she turned to him impulsively and placed her small ice-cold hands in his.

"Oh, thank you—thank you!" she exclaimed brokenly. "How kind, how good you are to me!" And then, covering her face with her hands, she burst into a passion of helpless tears.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SECOND WILL.

"Therefore, though justice be thy plea, consider this."

—SHAKESPEARE.

MR. VENNER, who, in truth, had only spoken because he had thought himself compelled to do so, and who was in no way conscious of having shown any special kindness or goodness towards her, was suddenly and strangely touched. Helen's weakness, her tears, and the little childlike appeal for help moved him deeply.

Mr. Venner had daughters of his own. One of them, not much older than this unhappy girl, had been married about two years ago. He remembered her wedding as if it had been only yesterday. The crowded rooms, the happy faces, the smiles and the merry laughter, the good wishes of friends and relations, and all the heartfelt blessings and congratulations which had been showered upon the radiant bride and her proud young husband, on that day of all days of a woman's life—her marriage morning!

And this bride—with her white and woe-begone face, tearing the jewels from her hair and neck, with no mother to smile upon her, no father to stand by her, no crowd of friends to press about

her and wish her joy—this bride, who was all alone amongst strangers, whilst her newly-made husband lay half dead in an adjoining room—what a horrible contrast it was to that other happy scene !

In silence he helped her to unfasten her jewels, and the shining stones slipped down in a heap, with a little rustling clatter, on the table between them.

Lady Bainton never wore the family diamonds again.

“You ought to have something to eat,” said Mr. Venner kindly. “What is the use of giving way? You will want all your strength.”

She sat down to the table. “You are quite right. I will eat and drink. Perhaps if I am strong and brave I shall be allowed to help presently to nurse him.”

They gave her some champagne and put some food upon her plate. The others sat down too, and for a few minutes there was a little pretence on all sides. Probably neither Venner nor Scarsdale had much appetite, but they ate to encourage Helen, and she swallowed a few mouthfuls and gulped down the wine in her glass in order to please and satisfy them.

The refreshment, however, undoubtedly revived and restored her, for she had been almost faint from all the varied emotions of the morning.

A little colour stole back into her pale face, and she found herself better able to control the tears which had for a moment threatened to become hysterical.

Presently Sir Augustus came in to report that the Earl was conscious and decidedly better.

Helen sprang up eagerly and begged to be allowed to be of use, but he told her that she must on no account go into the room—it was essential that his patient should be kept quiet and free from agitation.

“I have given him a draught which I hope will

give him some sleep. Mrs. Hogan, the nurse, is a very capable person, and she has my full directions. Nobody else need go into the room. Mr. Wright is gone now, but he will return in about an hour's time, and I will look in again this evening. If I should be required before then, the nurse knows where to send. Good-morning, Lady Bainton."

And with a bow the great man hurried away.

The other two gentlemen rose almost immediately to take their departure. The clergyman wished her good-bye with kind and pitying eyes. "If you should want a friend," he said, as he held her hand, "it may, perhaps, be presumption on my part, Lady Bainton, to suppose that you stand in need of friends?"

"Oh, indeed," she interrupted quickly, "I do need friends. I have not one in the whole world save Lord Bainton."

"Is that so? then count on me, my dear lady. If there is anything I can do for you. Here is my card—send for me if you want me at any hour of the day or night—I will come at once."

He pressed her hand once more and left her, and as he went out of the house Mr. Venner said to himself as he was walking rapidly away through Portman Square towards his own house:

"After all I was mistaken. That woman is not what I supposed her to be. She is neither base nor mercenary. She is only unhappy. She has had a history. There is more in the story of that marriage than is to be seen on the surface of it."

And all day long he was haunted by memories of those pathetic grey eyes and by the vision of that pale woman tearing off her shining diamonds with a sort of panic of despair.

After he was gone, Mr. Scarsdale too rose to take leave of her.

With a little deprecatory cough and averted eyes he said:

"You are perhaps aware, Lady Bainton, that the Earl signed his new will this morning in my presence?"

Helen bent her head in assent.

"Perhaps I should mention that that will is in my possession. I do not approve of it. It is in my opinion an iniquitous will, but since my remonstrances to you have had apparently no effect——"

"Do you not think that it is singularly bad taste on your part, Mr. Scarsdale, to discuss this subject in my presence?" said Helen, moving away coldly from him.

"My dear lady—business is business—and alas! 'in the midst of life we are in death!' When Lord Bainton recovers himself sufficiently, I wish to urge upon you the duty of suggesting a modification of this most unfair disposition of his property, and of sending for me without delay to put things upon a more equitable basis."

Helen smiled a little scornfully. The detestable motives with which this conventionally-minded little lawyer accredited her, would almost have amused her, had she been in a mood to be amused.

Perhaps he did not know that she had money, more than enough, of her own, certainly he did not know how every day that she lived, she realized more and more how little happiness her money had brought to her, and how utterly its false and transient promises had failed her. Why should this man imagine that she wanted Lord Bainton's fortune? What had she ever done to deserve such a cruel suspicion?

Yet she could not explain herself to him. Neither would she condescend to make a certain revelation to him of recent events, which would place her in a totally different light in his eyes. She was too proud to do that, and moreover, her tongue was sealed. She remained silent.

"Your husband is very ill, Lady Bainton," said

Mr. Scarsdale again, after a brief pause. "It is my duty to tell you that if he were to die without having repaired the wrong he has done to his sister and his nephew, I should most decidedly advise Lady Camilla Greyson to dispute the will on the score of undue influence."

"*My* influence?" enquired Helen, turning round upon him sharply, with a heightened colour.

Mr. Scarsdale bowed. "Certainly, I mean your influence, madam," rejoined the lawyer, also with some show of temper, "exerted upon a man so weakened and reduced by illness as to be physically in an unfit condition to resist the unscrupulous plans of a scheming woman."

Then Helen lost her temper in downright earnest. She spoke only one word, but that word was spoken with an unmistakable energy and accompanied by a gesture as decided as it was swift.

She lifted her arm straight from the shoulder and pointed to the door.

"Go!" she said, with flashing eyes and shortened breath, and Mr. Scarsdale, with a small and evil smile, obeyed her and went.

Directly she was alone, Helen flew across the passage to the door of her husband's room. Stooping down till her ear was on a level with the keyhole she listened breathlessly for a few moments at the door. There was not a sound to be heard within, indeed the loud beats of her own heart almost prevented her from hearing anything else.

After a few seconds she turned the handle of the door as noiselessly as possible, and crept softly into the darkened room.

Mrs. Hogan, the nurse, who sat at the foot of the bed, rose with an outstretched hand to bar her entrance, but on seeing who it was, a natural feeling prompted her to withdraw her opposition, she made a sign to her to come forward quietly.

"My lord is better, my lady," she whispered in her ear, "I think he is dozing."

Helen went quickly to a heavy oaken bureau which stood in a corner of the room, opened a side drawer and took out of it a folded paper, then taking a pen and a small ink-bottle in her other hand, she said in a hurried whisper to the nurse who had watched her proceedings suspiciously:

"It is necessary that Lord Bainton should sign this paper, you must rouse him up."

"Oh, my lady! I would not do such a thing for worlds! What! awake him now, just as he has taken a composing draught and is dozing off. Why a sleep may be his salvation—I could not do it, indeed I could not!"

"Look here, Nurse, I tell you you *must*," answered Helen firmly, and then she took her arm and drew her away behind the screen that sheltered the door, so that nothing she said could possibly reach the sick man's ears. "Nurse, you know as well as the doctors do that Lord Bainton has an incurable disease."

"Oh, my lady, there is always hope whilst there is life."

"Never mind. You know that in all human probability Lord Bainton cannot live many months, more than that, that he might very possibly die at any moment, is it not so?"

"I sadly fear—I should not like to distress you by saying so, my lady."

"This is not a time to think of my distress," answered Helen, whose face was strangely flushed and excited, "it is a question of a great wrong to be redressed, a mistake to be set right, something by which, if he signs his name to this paper which I wrote at his dictation this morning, Lord Bainton will do an action of justice, and if he dies without signing it, the evil will be irreparable. I am determined that he shall sign it. Now do you under-

stand me? There is no time like the present. Very soon Mr. Wright will come back, and he will drive me out of the room; his lordship is calm, the little doze he is having will have refreshed him. Who can tell how long this gleam of improvement may last, or how soon he may become unconscious once more? Now go and rouse him up fully. I am his wife, I have a right to give you orders, if you do not obey me, I shall discharge you."

Mrs. Hogan was unable to withstand so direct an appeal to her self-interests. She protested feebly, it is true, but she went to the bedside all the same to execute Lady Bainton's orders, and lifted the invalid a little upon his pillow. Lord Bainton opened his eyes, and as they fell upon his wife a smile of pleasure overspread his face.

"Ah, Helen!" he murmured, holding out his feeble hands to her, "this is a sad wedding-day for you, my dear. But I am better, much better; I shall cheat the doctors yet."

Then Mrs. Hogan, at a sign from her, retired into the further room.

"You are feeling really better, dear Lord Bainton?" asked Helen, as she bent over him.

"Yes, dear, much better."

"Then I want you just to sign the paper that I wrote out this morning," and she placed the pen in his fingers, "please try, it will not take long to write your name. See, I will hold the paper for you and guide your hand."

"Oh, child, there is no hurry, why do you care so much about it?"

"You have promised me, remember."

"Yes, a foolish promise. Let it be, let it be. She deserved nothing at my hands, she treated you badly, let her suffer her punishment."

"Do not let us argue it all over again," said Helen gently. "You know that I can never be happy unless it is done, never."

He took the pen in his hand, holding it doubtfully for a moment, then he glanced up at her suddenly.

"You have made it clear about the six months?"

"Quite clear. It is exactly as you said it should be."

"And you will keep your promise to me? For six months from the day of my death you will not speak of this second will of mine to a living creature? You will allow the will which Scarsdale has, and by which I have left you everything, to come into operation and you will make no sign? Swear it to me once more."

"I swear it to you."

"Very well, then, it shall be as you wish. But remember that I consider it foolish and Quixotic of you to insist upon it, and but for that redeeming clause about the six months, which will at any rate give my sister some sort of retribution for her cruelty, I would not sign it at all."

He lifted his hand with difficulty and Helen guided it into the right place.

It was at this precise moment that Mrs. Hogan, devoured by that curiosity which has been the curse of her sex since the foundation of the world, crept back softly through the open doorway from the dressing-room, and stood listening behind the tall screen.

"Remember," said Lord Bainton, in a distinct voice, "it is you that made do this. I have no wish to alter things. I am signing this second will only under strong pressure."

Then there was a second of silence, and immediately Lady Bainton called out:

"Nurse!"

Mrs. Hogan came quickly forward, and Helen desired her to summon a housemaid, so that they might both sign their names as witnesses to the document.

When this was done Helen sealed up the paper in a long envelope, and carried it away safely to her own room upstairs.

CHAPTER XXX.

TOO LATE.

“Ye Gods ! annihilate but space and time,
And make two lovers happy !”

—POPE.

IT was evening. The doctors had come and gone for the last time that day, and had pronounced their patient to be decidedly better. The prescribed sleeping draught had been administered to him, and he had sunk into a heavy slumber. The house was in profound silence, and Helen sat alone by the fireside in the little morning-room half-way up the stairs, which she preferred to any of the great, handsome reception-rooms downstairs, in their ghostly loneliness, that oppressed her with their size and their emptiness.

It was, at any rate, cosy enough in this little square room, with the red curtains and the warm fire-glow, the table, with the shaded lamp upon it, drawn up before the hearthrug, and the comfortable arm-chair in the chimney corner.

Mrs. Sims had brought her a little repast here upon a tray—for Davis had asked to go out, and she always preferred to be waited upon by the motherly housekeeper. Her meal did not occupy her long, and after it was over and the tray had been removed, she found herself a book, and drew the big arm-chair close in to the fire and pretended to read.

It was but a poor pretence after all, for her brain was busy with teeming thoughts. What she had done—now that it was done beyond recall—made her deeply anxious. On the whole she did

not regret her marriage ; it had, at any rate, given her a home and a right to remain where she was. It had given her, too, a position, and security from insult. She was safe now in Lord Bainton's house—his name was a shield and a protection to her, and, ill though he was, not one of her enemies could reach her or molest her so long as she remained under his roof. And she had made him happy too. It had been a sick man's fancy to make her his wife, and in doing so she had made him the only return for his goodness that was in her power. From the bottom of her heart she prayed that his life might be prolonged, if only for a few months, so that she might prove her gratitude to him by her loving devotion. That he should be doomed to die made her very sad indeed, but, sad as it was, the thought that it might lie in her power to render his last days on earth happy, filled her with a deep sense of thankfulness.

As she sat on by herself, reviewing her position and turning all these thoughts over in her mind, the distant ringing of the door-bell hardly caught her ears, and did not suffice to arrest her attention. It was only when the door opened behind her and a timid voice began, "If you please, my lady," that she realised that the bell meant that something or someone had come to break in upon her solitude.

A housemaid stood in the doorway.

"If you please, my lady, there is a gentleman who has called to see you."

"A gentleman? Did you open the door to him, Jane?"

"Yes, my lady, Mr. Davis being out, James has just run across to the post for a minute, and Mr. Williams, the valet, has gone to the chemist for something as the nurse sent down to say she required, so there was no one but me to answer the door."

"Never mind about that," said Helen, cutting

short these elaborate apologies for the defaulting men-servants. "Who is the gentleman, and have you admitted him?"

"He would not give his name, my lady; he is waiting in the hall."

"You should have told him that Lord Bainton is very ill, and that visitors are not received at present."

"So I did, my lady, but he wouldn't take no denial, and just stepped past me into the hall and said, 'Go and tell Miss Dacre that a gentleman desires to see her on a matter of great importance.' He did not know in course that you was not Miss Dacre any longer, and I was going on to explain it to him, but he stopped me quite angry like, and says he, 'Go at once and tell her, and don't stop here talking.'"

Jane did not think it necessary to add that the gentleman had given her a sovereign to expedite matters.

Helen rose slowly to her feet. Without a doubt it was Frederick Warne come back once more to persecute her with his odious pretensions. For the second time he had forced his way into Lord Bainton's house and had insisted upon seeing her, in spite of the efforts of the servants to refuse him admittance.

Well, she feared him no longer! He was powerlest now—his threats and his entreaties were alike defeated. He could not bring his old aunt to taunt her with the unseemliness of her position, and to flout her for immodesty if she refused to go back with her to the shelter of Aberdare House; neither could he hold over her head those vague terrors of scandal and of public exposure, by which, in hinting at an action for breach of promise he had hitherto been able to strike absolute terror into her mind.

A sense of triumph came to her. She had outwitted him; she could turn the tables on him now,

for was she not a wife in her husband's house? How small, and mean, and humbled he would feel, when he learnt the truth from her lips!

Her courage rose; there was a bright spot of colour on either cheek, and her eyes glittered with a certain eagerness as she bade the girl go and bring the gentleman up.

"I will see him here," she said with decision. "Ask him to come upstairs," and then she waited, standing with her back to the fireplace and her face towards the door.

Two or three minutes passed away. Helen, in her impatience for the triumph she anticipated, found them long; she wanted to repay him for all the annoyance he had caused her, to see his self satisfied face change and fall as she made known her great news to him! How slowly the minutes went by!

The clock ticked behind her, the coals fell in with a little crash, and the flames leapt merrily up the chimney; then at last the door was thrown widely open, and a man came in out of the gloom of the dimly-lit staircase and landing.

Two paces into the room, and by the time the retreating Jane had closed the door again, the visitor stood close before her, full in the warm light of the lamp and fire.

Helen uttered a smothered cry and fell back, clutching at the mantelshelf behind her. All the bright colour vanished from her face, leaving her deadly pale, and a cold faintness almost overpowered her, for the man who stood before her was not Frederick Warne—it was Gilbert Nugent!

Nugent, who had parted with her in anger because she had told him a lie, who had sworn never to see her again, who had left her to despair and utter hopelessness, and whose harshness and cruelty had driven her into making a wreck of her whole life!

"Oh, no, no!" she wailed incoherently at the

sight of him, and then she cowered and bent her head, hiding her face in her hands so that she might not see him, whom only to-day she had prayed never to see again.

"I have frightened you, Helen! I have come too suddenly! Ah, forgive me, my dear one, and look up—look up—let me see your sweet face once more—let me hear you say that you will forgive me!"

He came eagerly forward with outstretched hands. He took her shrinking, trembling form into his arms, and would have drawn her to his heart, but she pushed him roughly away.

"Oh, you must go, you must go!" she gasped. "You must not stay here! Oh! I never thought that it could be you—go—I entreat you!"

Her face was white and drawn, and there was positive anguish in her dark eyes as they looked up into his, pushing him away from her as she did so with her feeble hands.

But Nugent had come to her, full of new hopes and resolutions, and he was not to be so easily repulsed.

"Why am I to go, pray? Is your heart so hard against me, darling, that you cannot forgive me, though I come to you a penitent and deeply humble man? I am here to own myself in the wrong, to tell you that I do not believe you to have been so much to blame as I was, for, if you lied to me' I on my part, was, God knows, utterly unworthy of you. But now I have thought it all over; I have realised the error of my life, and have resolved to sin no more. I have written to her—to Dora—I have freed myself, and to free myself still more effectually I am going abroad at once for three whole years, so that in the days to come no shadow of my disgrace may rest for a moment on the pure and stainless life of her I still am bold enough to hope some day to win. But before I go, I have come to bid you farewell, and to plead, not only for your forgiveness, but for that love which you

told me once, I have been so fortunate as to win. Will you forgive me, dearest? Will you give me back your love—even as I give you back my faith and trust? And you are young, dare I ask you to wait for me till I come home again? to wait here in your guardian's house, and under his care, till time and absence have purified my life and rendered me less unfit to plead for the gift of your hand from him?"

She heard him to the end. She was powerless to stem the current of his eager words. She could not speak. A horrible numbness overpowered her mentally and physically; it was as though Death itself had laid its icy grip upon her. At last, a long, miserable moan broke from her white lips, and eluding the grasp of his eager hands she slipped down upon the chair behind her, shivering from head to foot.

In an instant he was kneeling by her side, kissing her cold hands with all a lover's intensity.

"What is it, my own, my love? Why do you turn from me? And why are you so cold and so trembling? Is it possible that in so short a time you have ceased to care for me?—or have I sinned past forgiveness, and can you not forget my offence? But you shall prove me, put me to the test; you shall see how faithfully I will love you, how patiently I will wait for you——"

"Oh, hush! hush!" she cried brokenly and wildly. "You must not speak to me like that—oh! if you only knew—if you only knew!"

For the first time a little uneasiness crept into his mind.

"What is it?" he asked, looking at her curiously. "What is there to know? and why do you turn away from me?"

For she had twisted herself away into the corner of the deep arm-chair, hiding her face in the satin cushions, so that he could only see the dark head with its masses of soft, disordered hair.

"I don't quite understand, Helen darling. Are you in any fresh trouble, or are you angry with me, too angry to speak to me? or—but the servant told me that Lord Bainton was very ill—I hardly heard her—but of course—that is your trouble—you are very anxious and unhappy about the poor old man?"

And then, driven desperate by these guesses and surmises, Helen sat up, pushed the thick locks back from her damp brow, and faced the man she loved, but whom by her own deed she had lost for ever—faced him with such an agony of despair in her haggard eyes and white, drawn lips, as told him at last that here indeed was some terrible trouble—something quite above and beyond anything he could possibly divine or imagine.

"I must tell you the truth," she gasped. "I cannot let you go on in ignorance—I have done what will make you hate and despise me—what will debase and degrade me for ever in your eyes—and will show you how bad and vile and wicked a woman I must be."

"Oh, Helen, for God's sake, do not say such terrible things! how can you be ever degraded or debased to me? Are you not my dream—my ideal—my pearl amongst women—my own dear, dear love?"

"No, I am not your love. I never can be your love—I am nothing to you—nothing, for—I was married to Lord Bainton this morning."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A LAST PARTING.

"'Tis better to have loved and lost."

—TENNYSON.

GILBERT NUGENT staggered blindly back, half stunned, against the wall of the little room.

The blow was so utterly unexpected, and so terrible, that for the first few moments he was

scarcely conscious of the pain that he was enduring.

"Married this morning! married this morning!" he repeated once or twice with a dull bewilderment, and although he said the words aloud, they seemed to convey no sort of meaning to his brain.

It was only the sight of Helen's distress that recalled him at length to a full sense of what had happened to him.

She had fallen forward across the couch on which she had been sitting; her face lay buried in her outstretched arms, whilst the most heart-rending sobs shook her whole body. It seemed as though at length all the varied emotions and painful experiences of the whole day had culminated in this almost hysterical outburst of grief. Those great tearless sobs that arose in the silence of the little room one after the other, with a terrible regularity, seemed to rend the frail and tender form with cruel and agonising precision.

She offered no explanation—she made no excuse—only she lay there prone and speechless like a dumb animal in its mortal anguish.

It was horrible to witness. It recalled him to himself—it seemed to bridge over the yawning gulf between them—to bring them near to one another in this common calamity.

He stole forward and knelt down by her side.

"Don't, dear, don't!" he said, gently and tenderly passing his hand softly over her thick, tumbled locks, "for my sake, Helen—don't sob like that."

The sound of his voice calmed her a little—she tried to control herself—and his hand still caressed her head with a gentle touch.

He murmured some low, vague words of comfort—such as he might have spoken to a weeping child—words that meant but little in themselves, yet that soothed and quieted her instinctively.

After a little while she sat up and faced him,

looking so white, and wan, and wretched, that it cut him to the heart to see her.

"Why are you so good to me? I do not deserve it," she said brokenly. "How is it that you do not curse and revile me?"

"My poor little girl!" was his only answer.

And then, after a moment of silence, he broke out passionately and wildly:

"Oh, why did you do it? why did you do it?"

"You had left me!" she answered with a gesture of despair. "You told me that it was all over—all over! those were your own words! Oh! did you ever think how they would ring in my ears day and night—day and night, till they almost drove me mad! and then they persecuted me to marry that man whom I hate; they told me he could force me to marry him, but I would rather have died than be his wife! And so I came here. Lord Bainton was my only friend—he was always good to me—I had no home, and he offered me his; I had no protector, and with him I could be safe—I had lost you—I had no hope anywhere—and so I did what he wanted, because I knew I should make him happy, and should be at peace myself. But, oh! if I had known that you loved me still—that you would forgive me so soon—do you suppose I could have done it? It was only because I thought you had done with me for ever!"

"Ah, child!" he answered very sadly, rising slowly from his knees and leaning against the mantelpiece opposite to her. "You know very little of love if you think that it can be killed so easily! As soon as I had left you I was wretched—my conscience began to reproach me for my harshness—my heart to urge a thousand excuses for your fault—it was certain to have been only a question of time that I should come back to throw myself at your feet again, and then one day a friendly woman gave me the help of her kind encouragement, and my

pride surrendered to my love, and I came to you, but I have come too late! Oh, my God, too late, too late!"

And with a groan he turned away from her and hid his face in his hands.

"If you had only come yesterday—only yesterday," she wailed, "I should have been saved!"

"It is all my fault," he said, after a brief pause, almost more eloquent than words, and she could see that there were tears in his eyes. "All my own fault! I see it now plainly. I have behaved like a coward and a blackguard to you—to you as well as to that other woman, whose life, like yours, I have spoilt by my folly and my sinful weakness."

"You will go back to her now, I suppose?" she said presently, moved by a faint gleam of that woman's jealousy, which not all the terrible reality of the misfortune that had befallen them both was able to extinguish in her.

"No. By the God above us, I swear to you that I will never go back to her! I have already written to free myself from her toils, and I will never return to the false and shameful position which I had drifted into, at first unconsciously, but in the end with a culpable knowledge of what I was doing. Do you think, Helen, that, after having known and loved you—you who are the purest, the noblest, the best—that I could go back again to the slavery, the moral degradation in which I have been held so long? No, no, you have at least done one good thing for me—you have shown me that to have been loved by a pure-souled woman, such as you are, is something to be proud and glad of to one's dying day—a sort of consecration which I shall never forget, or be unworthy of again."

"Thank God for that!" she murmured, with a gush of tears, in which there was no longer any bitterness, and which relieved a little the aching pain at her heart.

"I am going away, Helen," he continued presently. "Going, as I have told you, to the other side of the world. Only that now, instead of remaining there for three years, I shall stay out there. I am a poor man. I have idled away my life long enough; it is time I put my shoulder to the wheel, as other poor men have to do, and, instead of living upon my friends, I mean to work for myself, and earn my own bread. In the Colonies there are many openings for a man who is young and strong, and I shall soon find something to do."

Then Helen rose and laid her small hands gently and pleadingly upon his arm.

"Do me one kindness before you go, Gilbert. It is the only thing I ask of you. It is I who supplanted you in your uncle's will, who robbed you of the fortune that ought to have been yours. Let me at any rate repair that injustice. Take from me before you go at least sufficient to keep you in comfort and to start you in your new life——"

"No, no," he interrupted quickly, laying a hand upon hers. "I cannot take your money, Helen. I could not touch it. Don't think me ungrateful and proud, but it is impossible! Besides your husband——" his voice failed a little as he said the word.

"My husband is good and generous," she answered, not without a little tremor of wifely pride. "He will agree to all that I wish. He would be the first to wish it."

"Say no more, I entreat you," he said hastily. "I cannot even discuss such a thing with you. Ask me anything else instead, Helen—anything else in the wide world—and I will do it."

For a few minutes she was silent—thinking deeply. Deep down in her heart there was indeed a thought—a wish—that her dignity—her pride—her position as the wife of another man almost forbade her to put into words. And yet—and yet!

the longer she thought of it, the more it seemed to her that it was utterly impossible to let him go from her for ever without some such word being spoken between him and her.

The present hour was like a death-bed parting. When they bade one another farewell, as in a few more brief moments it would become necessary to do, they would bid each other good-bye for ever! There could be no recalling of him again—no possibility of another interview. When he left this room, where he and she stood now, speaking heart to heart as they had never spoken before, he would go also out of her life for ever. It was her last opportunity.

Could she, loving him as she did, and sure as she now was of his stedfast and entire devotion, permit him to turn his back upon her for ever, without speaking that one word which might come to mean so much, so very much to him throughout all the blank of future years?

The colour rose hotly and burningly in her downcast face. He saw how she trembled, and how her lips quivered, and guessed that she had indeed yet another request to make of him.

"What is it?" he whispered. "Tell me, and I will do it. Did you not save my life, Helen? And is not that life yours by right of conquest? Speak to me the thought that I can see is in your heart."

She lifted her eyes with a sudden courage to his.

"Can you give me some address that will always find you?" she asked hurriedly.

He wrote down on the back of his card the name of the bankers in Auckland who would always know where to forward his letters.

"Now swear to me," she said, as she took the card from his hand, "that if ever—no matter how many years hence—I write or telegraph to you to come back—that if I want you—you will come to me."

"I swear to you," he answered solemnly, "that if ever you send for me I will come to you from the uttermost ends of the earth, if it is in human possibility for me to do so."

After that there was little left to be said between them. Both knew that the moment of parting had come ; to prolong these last words and looks would be worse than useless. She glanced at the clock, and he answered the gesture with a sigh.

"Yes, I know it is time for me to go." He took her two hands in his as she stood up before him, and looked earnestly into her face. "Dear love," he said with a deep and solemn tenderness, "you will, I know, keep a brave heart, and bear nobly the trouble which has fallen upon you. Do not reproach yourself too much ; these things are beyond the power of us blind human puppets ; we cannot struggle with our fate. We loved one another, we might have been happy—but—it was not to be ! But if ever, in your darkest hours of trial and of loneliness, it is any comfort to you to remember it, do not forget that somewhere in this world there is one true heart that will be for ever yours, one staunch friend who would give his life-blood to serve you ! You have taught me a great deal, Helen ! As I told you once before, you have been my good angel ! I always knew that somewhere beneath my frivolity, my recklessness, and my many bad actions, there was within me that which was capable of raising me, and of making a man of me. Well, it is your sweet hand that has done this for me. The old life is dead for me, and a new and, I trust, a better one is before me, and wherever I go your gentle spirit will go with me, to encourage me and to strengthen me in my uphill path. God bless you, Helen, my good angel !"

He took her head between his hands, and gazed, with a long lingering intensity, into her dark

sorrow-laden eyes, then he stooped and pressed his lips for one moment upon her forehead.

There was no passion in that kiss, it was solemn and sad, with the tender solemnity, the unutterable sadness, of an eternal farewell.

In another moment it was over. The door closed softly upon him, and there was, in that empty little room, only a heart-broken woman, lying in speechless anguish upon the ground.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MOVE TO LONDON

“ Things bad begun, make strong themselves by ill.”

—SHAKESPEARE.

DORA TORRINGTON sat alone on the corner of her bed in her own room at Oldpark.

An open letter, which the morning's post had brought to her, was in her hand. She was not looking at it; her eyes were fixed blankly upon the window, and upon the dreary winter landscape without, but she saw nothing of it.

What she did see was the wreck and ruin of a mis-spent life, the husks of a wasted existence, and the bitter fruits of ill-regulated and unlawful desires.

It was all over now; her victim had escaped her, her dupe had shaken himself free, he was going away, he said, away to New Zealand.

Fool that she had been, not to see that some day his manhood would awaken and his independence assert itself! At any moment in all these long years he might have broken loose in this way, have made a stand in this fashion, against which she could do nothing. For she could not go to New Zealand after him; she had not the effrontery, and, worse than that, she had not the money.

That was were the shoe chiefly pinched her—she was poor, she was hampered by debts, she was

worried out of her life by creditors. And yet she would have counted it all as nothing, if she could have kept Gilbert Nugent.

"Heaven knows I was not mercenary in my love for him," said the wretched woman to herself as the miserable tears coursed themselves one by one down her cheeks, making suspicious little streaks on their pink surface. "I loved him for himself, I wanted him for my own, just because I have never seen anybody like him ; nobody half so handsome, so popular, so clever. I have put up with all his fancies and whims, his flirtations with other women, his bad tempers to myself, and after all these years this is the reward I get ! he takes himself off to the other side of the world, and says he means to stay there till the three years of our compact are over, and he is free to come home and marry some one else ! Well, it might be worse, for he might have married that wretched girl, Helen Dacre ! That would have driven me mad ! But, thank goodness, I was successful in putting him out of conceit with *her* ; my little plan answered perfectly ; he will never have anything to say to her again. If I lose him, she, at least, does not gain him ; that is something to be thankful for, anyhow !"

At this moment she heard Lady Camilla's voice calling to her loudly.

"Dora ! Dora ! Where are you ? Come here at once, I want you !"

Dora dashed the bitter tears out of her blue eyes, and rose quickly to respond to the summons.

Slipping her letter into her pocket, she went hastily out of the room, and met Lady Camilla rushing upstairs with such consternation and dismay in her face as made her instantly perceive that something very serious was the matter.

"What is it, Camilla ? What has happened ?" she cried, running towards her. Naturally her thoughts flew to Ted. Had he met with an acci-

dent at Eton—been stamped upon at football, or had his eye knocked out by a fives-ball? Surely nothing short of this could account for Lady Camilla's terrible appearance. She was purple in the face, her eyes stared wildly out of her head, and she struggled for breath. Dora felt persuaded that she was on the verge of a fit of some kind.

"What is it? What is it?" she cried again.

And Lady Camilla, thrusting out a newspaper and pointing to it with a shaking fore-finger, managed in a half asphyxiated whisper, to ejaculate:

"Read this! Read this!"

Dora took the *Times* newspaper from her trembling hands, and read as follows:

"On the 23rd instant, by special licence, at 52, Portman Square, by the Rev. Charles Venner, Rector of the parish of St Matthew, John Edward Ravenstoke, sixth Earl of Bainton, to Helen, only child of the late Colonel Dacre, of her Majesty's Royal Irish Fusiliers."

"Great Heavens!" ejaculated Mrs. Torrington, in a voice of utter amazement, "Great Heavens above!" and then suddenly she dropped down upon an oak chest upon the landing behind her, and laughed, and laughed, till she could not speak for laughter!

Lady Camilla, with rage and indignation boiling within her, stood there, glaring at her. Somehow, this unseemly mirth restored her a little to herself, and when the widow's paroxysms began to subside, she found voice to say to her with angry dignity:

"I fail to see the reason of your amusement! What are you laughing at, pray?"

"Oh, my dear Camilla! Pray, pray forgive me. But really, I positively cannot help myself. It's too, too unspeakably funny!"

"What is funny? That I should be absolutely ruined, and the hopes of my whole life, and all Ted's prospects, blasted and spoilt by the unprincipled machinations of a vile and miserable adventuress?"

"Oh no, my dear! Heaven knows I feel sorry enough for you. It's horrible! But really, when I come to think of that girl, and how clever she has been, and how completely she has outwitted you, it *does* make me laugh to see what perfect fools—you and I, who thought ourselves so wise—have been in her hands! I positively can't help admiring her!"

"It's all very well for you, Dora," said Lady Camilla, impatiently and angrily. "Of course you can afford to laugh. It's not you who suffer by this. I should like to know, my dear, what you would have said if the wretch had run away and married Gilbert Nugent, instead of my poor brother! She might have done that quite as easily."

"Oh no, my dear, she mightn't. I took good care of that! I played my cards too carefully. You should have looked after her better. Why did you go bullying her, and tormenting her, that evening when she was ill in bed, till you frightened her into running away to Lord Bainton for protection? You ought not to have let her out of your sight that night. You ought to have dressed her with your own hands like a mother, and brought her downstairs with you, and kept your eye upon her, and coaxed and petted her, till you had persuaded her into being civil to that man Warne, instead of which, you left her all by herself and scolded her, till she got desperate and escaped on the sly from the house."

"What is the use of going all over that again? I know I made a mistake, but who could have imagined that I should be punished in such a cruel

and horrible manner? Who could suppose that meek-looking girl could turn out to be such a viper! such a monster! such a perfect fiend?"

"I can't think now how she has managed this marriage! Why, Bainton was ill in bed, you heard only yesterday."

"That is how it has been done, depend upon it! He is ill still, no doubt. You see the marriage was celebrated in the house, not in a church. She has got over him whilst he was weak and ill, trumped up some story, played upon his feelings, I dare say!"

"Oh, his feeling didn't require much playing upon, my dear. I always told you that Bainton was spooney on her—only you were so blind you wouldn't see it."

"Oh dear! oh dear! oh dear!" wailed Lady Camilla, wringing her hands piteously. "What will become of my poor Ted? His future will be ruined."

"You can't be sure of that. Your brother may not perhaps cut Ted out of his Will," said the widow, with another attempt at consolation.

"Oh, trust the creature for that! it will be the very first thing she will see to, of course! She ought to be hung. Such crimes deserve capital punishment."

"Well, failing hanging her, which I'm afraid under the existing laws of this country isn't feasible, what steps do you propose to take?"

"I'm going up to town, of course."

"What, to Portman Square?"

"Of course not. To Lincoln's Inn. I have already sent off a telegram to Mr. Scarsdale. I shall go to his chambers and consult him."

"And Tom? is he going with you?"

"Tom is perfectly brutal to me. Like you, he laughs—positively laughs!—and says that Ted must take his chance like other boys. He thinks

as you do, that Helen Dacre is cleverer than we have any of us given her credit for being, and what is more, he declares that hunting is so nearly over that nothing will induce him to give up even one day and go up to town with me. Oh! men *are* selfish brutes!"

"So they are, dear. No doubt at all about that. We women all find it out in time; I became aware of the fact a great many years ago. Well, Camilla, as Tom won't go to London with you, I have a great mind to; that is, if you will pay my expenses."

"Oh, of course, Dora; and certainly, unkind as you are to me, you will be better than nobody. I can, at any rate, talk out to you."

"Thanks, dearest; how nice you are! who shall say that men have the sole monopoly of selfishness? Oh, my dear, don't protest—no polite lies between you and me, please—we understand each other too thoroughly! And I am not going to pretend that I want to go to London with you merely in order to console and comfort you; I have got my own reasons for wanting to go to Town. I don't mind telling you that I also have had bad news this morning. Read this letter," and she pulled Nugent's epistle out of her pocket.

It was now Lady Camilla's turn to laugh.

"Escaped you after all, has he?"

"Not yet. He hasn't started yet."

"And you want to see him and alter his decision I suppose?"

"Certainly. I mean to do my best to prevent his taking himself off to the Antipodes."

"Ah, well, my dear Dora," remarked Lady Camilla, sententiously, as she folded up the letter and returned it to her, "if you take my advice, you will let him go. It would be infinitely better for you if this somewhat discreditable affair were broken off. I have always told you, you know,

that I don't approve of it, neither does Tom. It is a disgraceful sort of business altogether, and does not redound at all to the advantage of your reputation——”

“Now stop that nonsense at once, Camilla,” interrupted Mrs. Torrington, with a heightened colour. “The idea of your preaching morals to me is positively sickening! Neither you nor I can afford to pose to each other as saints; we know each other too well. We are both of us sinners, the only difference between us being, that whereas I am a sinner openly, avowedly and honestly, you are one masked and disguised by hypocrisy and cant. What train are you going by, if you please? If you will tell me, I shall be quite ready to start in good time.”

Lady Camilla made a sulky rejoinder as to the proposed time of her departure, and Mrs. Torrington, leaving her to digest her remarks as she chose, went back into her own room to make her preparations for the journey to Town.

The two ladies travelled up to London by an afternoon train. Harmony had been restored between them. No good could accrue to either of them by a continuation of hostilities, and both were aware that a quarrel would be fatal to their mutual aims and interests.

They discussed the situation amicably and sympathetically together during the first half of the journey. Then, at a junction, midway to St. Pancras, an unforeseen interruption to their conversation occurred. The first-class carriage, which they had hitherto had to themselves, was invaded by a fellow-traveller, who entered with much commotion, ushered in by guard and porters, and followed by numerous rugs, bags and newspapers, that were handed in in succession by his man servant.

The intruder was a short, ugly little man, with

very red hair and an exceedingly long and narrow nose. His eyes, of a pale grey colour, were set rather close together, and his mouth and chin, covered by a yellowish red beard and moustache, seemed to retreat altogether into the warm recesses of the fur collar of his remarkably handsome coat.

When the train had gone on again and he had arranged a cloth rug embroidered with a large blue and gold monogram, and lined with dark fur, to his satisfaction across his knees, he looked up and met the wholly uninterested eyes of Mrs. Torrington, who happened to be seated opposite him.

No sooner had he looked at her than he appeared to be very much struck with her. Dora wore a smart little green felt hat and a remarkably well-fitting cloth jacket. Her fair hair and delicate complexion contrasted becomingly with her winter garments.

The gentleman in the otter fur coat considered her attentively—so attentively, in fact, that Dora dropped her eyes modestly upon her book. Presently—not perhaps without a purpose—she put up her hand to the strap to alter the height of the window. The stranger with the fox-like appearance sprang eagerly to his feet.

“Allow me!” he cried with alacrity, seizing the strap out of her small hand. “Would you like it entirely up?” he enquired politely.

“Thanks—not quite—just to the last hole,” replied Mrs. Torrington, with her sweetest smile; “that will do nicely.”

Upon this introduction they entered into conversation. The weather and the unpunctuality of the train service formed the opening topics. From thence they passed easily to London—its theatres, its picture galleries, its sights of all kinds.

Incidentally the stranger mentioned that he had lately given six thousand pounds for two small but

exquisite sketches of Turner's in a recent sale at Christie & Manson's. He mentioned it airily and lightly, as one who was accustomed to deal in thousands.

Dora Torrington pricked up her ears—that is to say, she smiled more seraphically than ever. She said, enthusiastically, that she adored pictures—especially Turner's pictures—and would give anything on earth to see these particular pictures.

Whereat Lady Camilla smiled sardonically to herself behind the shelter of her *World*.

The train was just slackening its speed into the terminus, and the stranger immediately and effusively entreated his fair neighbour to come to his London house and see his picture gallery. Then, ere he wished her adieu, he took out a card from a silver card-case and presented it to her.

Upon it was inscribed :

“Mr. Onesimus Bloggs, 264, Cromwell Road.”

He entreated to be told the lady's name in return. Mrs. Torrington produced her own card.

“And will you not bring Mr. Torrington with you ? ” enquired Mr. Bloggs blandly, studying the card through his eye-glass.

“Alas ! I am a widow ! ” sighed Dora, in her most pathetic style.

“Your friend, then ? ” continued Mr. Bloggs, with scarcely concealed delight, and with a wave of his hand towards the opposite corner of the carriage.

Mrs. Torrington introduced her. “My cousin, Lady Camilla Greyson.” Whereupon Mr. Bloggs smiled more blandly than ever. The aristocratic handle finished his subjugation. He went off a wholly conquered and semi-idiotic man.

“Pray what is the meaning of this farce ? ” enquired Lady Camilla coldly, as the two ladies

very red hair and an exceedingly long and narrow nose. His eyes, of a pale grey colour, were set rather close together, and his mouth and chin, covered by a yellowish red beard and moustache, seemed to retreat altogether into the warm recesses of the fur collar of his remarkably handsome coat.

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“Alas ! I am a widow ! ” sighed Dora, in her most pathetic style.

“Your friend, then ? ” continued Mr. Bloggs, with scarcely concealed delight, and with a wave of his hand towards the opposite corner of the carriage.

Mrs. Torrington introduced her. “My cousin, Lady Camilla Greyson.” Whereupon Mr. Bloggs smiled more blandly than ever. The aristocratic handle finished his subjugation. He went off a wholly conquered and semi-idiotic man.

“Pray what is the meaning of this farce ? ” enquired Lady Camilla coldly, as the two ladies

settled themselves in a four-wheeled cab with their boxes over their heads.

Dora shrugged her shoulders with a half laugh.

"Oh! It is always a good thing to have a second string to one's bow," she answered carelessly.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LADY CAMILLA IS TEMPTED.

"A little fire is quickly trodden out."

—SHAKESPEARE.

LADY CAMILLA got quite accustomed to sitting in Mr. Scarsdale's office in Lincoln's Inn during the next few days. She learnt to know every piece of old-fashioned furniture in the room by heart. The heavy writing-table, with its hacked and ink-stained green leather top, and the large dirty glass ink-stand, and all the papers and blue documents tied up with red tape that were piled about it, the mahogany chairs, the book-cases round the walls filled with dull-looking legal books, and the shelves that were heaped up to the ceiling with black japanned tin boxes, each labelled with the name of its particular owner, all became as familiar to her as the luxurious accessories and knick-knacks of her own boudoir at Oldpark.

She was in that dreary room morning, noon and night. Sometimes, if Mr. Scarsdale happened to be engaged with another client, she had to wait there for perhaps over an hour for him; and at such times she would sit by herself taking in every detail of her surroundings until she thought she must collapse into a state of imbecility. When she had read through all the leading articles of the morning paper, laid by her said by an obsequious clerk, all the news it contained, political and theatrical, all the records of royalty, all the notices

of new books and new soaps, had studied the long columns of advertisements, the coachmen, the cooks, and the housemaids, till she knew them all by heart, and began to weave histories about their last places and future situations, then impatiently she would toss the paper aside, and her eyes would wander, for the hundredth time, from the gas-stained ceiling to the threadbare carpet, and from the dusty backs of the law books and the white painted names upon the tin boxes to the dreary look-out of the back yard that was visible through the dusty window panes, where the London sparrows chirped and chattered with irritating monotony, till perhaps a famine-stricken cat, with mangy fur and stealthy movements, would prowl along the top of the wall, creating quite a diversion in the morning's proceedings by scattering the frightened flock into a sudden upward rush of wings out of her sight.

Why Lady Camilla sat there for all those weary hours, it would be a puzzling thing to say. It is certain that she did not derive much consolation from anything that Mr. Scarsdale told her. He had not scrupled to inform her that Lord Bainton had made a new will on his wedding-day, nor to imply by many shakings of the head and pursings up of the lips, that this will was wholly unfavourable to young Mr. Greyson's future prospects.

Scarsdale did not go to the length of showing her the will, but he allowed her to worm out of him the whole substance and gist of it, and, at the same time, he contrived by hints and mysterious allusions to instil into her a suspicion that the new Lady Bainton, who had doubtless worked in an undue manner over the invalid's feelings, was perfectly capable of working a yet further mischief to her and to hers.

A legacy of a thousand pounds, by his own earnest entreaty, was still to come to Ted Greyson,

and Mr. Scarsdale was of opinion that if Lady Bainton could, she would certainly manage to wrest from him even this small and miserable sum.

"But is there nothing to be done?—nothing?" Lady Camilla would cry in her despair. "Can no laws be brought to bear upon this wicked and mercenary woman to force her to disgorge the money that ought by every right, human and divine, to belong to my poor wronged boy?"

"There is unfortunately nothing to be done at present. The will was drawn up by me. I was almost—I most solemnly assure you, my lady—in tears! It is not possible to move a finger in the matter now. The Law"—Mr. Scarsdale always spoke this word as though he was alluding to a real and living thing—a deity to be only mentioned with reverence and bated breath—"the Law allows every man to dispose of his own as he pleases—provided always the form of his disposition is in order, and he himself is of sound mind, and his decision free and unprejudiced. It is impossible to dispute the fundamental principle that a testator has the power to leave his estate to his wife!"

"Then it is hopeless?"

Mr. Scarsdale cleared his throat and crossed and uncrossed his legs.

"It is not very hopeful. At the same time there *is* a loophole."

"Ah!"

"Mind, I don't say it is much—it were safer in fact not to build any hopes upon it—but still, there *is* a loophole. Your brother, Lady Camilla, was exceedingly ill on the morning he directed me to draw up this unjust will, and if it could be proved that the young woman had brought any pressure or undue influence to bear upon his lordship's mind, we might have a very pretty case at his death (which, alas, cannot now be a far distant event!), upon which to dispute the alteration of

the wishes of his whole life, which were certainly in favour of your son. But save in the way of collecting evidence, we cannot do anything, or move in any way at the present moment, and certainly I must advise you not to attempt to go to the house. Our business now must be to work our way cautiously to find out what happened in the sick chamber on the day that his lordship astounded me by sending his valet to me to command me to draw up a new will in favour of a lady whom he was going to marry within a few hours. I assure you, Lady Camilla, such an astonishing thing has never happened in all my professional experience! I said to myself at once—Who has brought about this?"

"But this evidence that you speak about—how is it to be obtained?"

"Mainly from the servants who were in attendance on his lordship at the time—they will have to be carefully questioned—severally—and separately—opportunities will have to be watched for and carefully seized. It will be a matter of time, and," added Mr. Scarsdale, leaning back in his armchair and considering Lady Camilla's face attentively—"it will be, I feel I must add—a matter of money."

Lady Camilla was quick enough to see that Mr. Scarsdale meant to imply that he must be paid for the investigations he proposed to start, and that, if he were paid, and well paid, that they would be more likely to turn out satisfactorily.

With a heightened colour she told him that to secure her son's interests she was prepared to make a sacrifice—any sacrifice in fact!

And then Mr. Scarsdale smiled blandly across the table at her.

Things were just at this point in their conversation one day, when a clerk entered the room, and whispered something in the solicitor's ear.

Mr. Scarsdale rose. "Will you be so obliging as

to excuse me one moment, Lady Camilla? There is someone waiting who wishes to see me very particularly," and with a bow the solicitor left the room.

Lady Camilla groaned. She knew what "one moment" meant in Mr. Scarsdale's vocabulary, it ranged over a wide period of time—anything from an hour-and-a-half down to twenty minutes, was comprised within the elastic limits of that convenient "one moment!" It was never by any chance less than twenty minutes.

She took up the paper—only to fling it down again with angry impatience. Even the servants who wanted places interested her no longer.

"Second where six are kept—town preferred," she murmured aloud, glancing at the requirements of a housemaid. "Why, the girl must be a fool! There aren't six houses in all London that want six housemaids I suppose! I am sure I hope she will be out of place for six months!" she added with an irrational viciousness; the fact being, that the poor lady was so worried and irritated, and embittered, that she really wanted something or somebody to wreak her wrath upon.

Presently, tired of sitting upon the straight-backed chair where she had remained without moving for the last three-quarters of an hour, she rose and sauntered to the window and stood for some minutes looking out into the yard. The prospect was not inviting—the usual sparrows, the usual dirt, and presently the usual mangy cat, bent on extermination, creeping round the corner of the scullery roof next door.

Bah! how sordid and ugly it was! and how tired she was of it all!

Was the prospect that Scarsdale (who wanted to be well paid) held out to her sufficiently hopeful, sufficiently promising, to recompense her for all these hours in dreary boredom? Lady Camilla turned away from the window with a gesture of

impatience, and as she did so, her eyes fell upon a high green-painted iron safe which stood in a sombre corner behind the window-curtain.

What made her notice it particularly now was that it presented an unaccustomed outline to her eye. The door was wide open, and Mr. Scarsdale's keys depended from the lock.

Lady Camilla stood before it absently for some minutes. She had never, to her knowledge, looked into an open safe before. On the lower shelf stood a strongly-clamped leather box.

"Family diamonds, I daresay," thought Lady Camilla to herself. "I wonder whose they are!"

Above these were three drawers. She pulled open the first with that kind of idle instinct which impels people to do something entirely purposeless, just because they have nothing to do.

The drawer was full of keys, and to every key was tied a white label, on which was written its object and its purpose.

"Lady Barber's settlements," "Joseph Haldon, Esq., will and codicil to ditto," "Mrs. Anna Green's testamentary provisions, plates, pictures, jewellery, etc.," "Title deeds of the Rothborough Estate," "Title deeds of freehold house property in London," and so on, and so on. She took the keys up one after the other, and read these inscriptions simply and solely out of idle curiosity. Presently her fingers touched another, and as her eyes fell upon the label of this one her hand tightened suddenly over the key. "Title deeds of Lord Bainton's estates and property in Cheshire. Agreement of lease of Portman Square, house and stables. Will dated 1880," was what was written upon this one, and then beneath two or three words were added in ink, that was apparently quite fresh, "Will, dated February 23rd, 1889."

That was the date of Lord Bainton's wedding last week!

Lady Camilla remained perfectly immovable, staring at the key in her hand. For some minutes she did not wink an eye-lash nor stir a finger. She was plunged in thought. Presently a quick frown swept across her brows, and she put her hand quickly forward as though to replace it in the drawer; then, with a short, gasping breath, she drew it slowly back again and passed the other hand, with a sort of distracted movement, over her face. There were beads of perspiration standing on her forehead. She turned round, walked swiftly across the room, and stood before the shelves with the piled-up rows of japanned boxes upon them.

There it was, sure enough, where she had read upon it over and over again the inscription: "The Earl of Bainton. Deeds, papers, etc."

Her own particular box, labelled "Lady C. Greyson's marriage settlements," stood below it.

"Deeds, papers, etc," murmured Lady Camilla below her breath. "The *Will* is there—it is certainly there!" and then she was quite still again for just as long as one might have counted twenty. All at once decision came to her! her face that had been pale, flushed into a deep brick red; she threw one hurried, guilty glance backwards over her shoulder towards the door, and then she lifted the tin box down from the shelf. It was the work of a moment to fit the key into the lock, and to open it. Her trembling hands searched hurriedly amongst the papers, with which it was filled to the brim.

The new *Will* lay almost at the top. She clutched at it eagerly and opened it. It took her but a very few seconds to understand that, with the exception of the one legacy of a thousand pounds to Ted, everything was left unconditionally and absolutely to "my beloved wife, Helen Countess of Bainton."

"And a good deal might yet be saved out of it—for me and for my boy," she murmured. "It would

be fair enough ; she would get her share ; I shall do her no harm, she has money of her own—more than enough—as it is, she will get more than she deserves ; it is she who would rob me, not I her.”

Then again, once more, for a few seconds she stood quite, quite still, holding the long blue paper in her hands and staring vacantly down at the threadbare carpet beneath her feet.

Suddenly, with a little gasping breath, she threw up her head ; turned the key quickly in the tin box, and replaced it on the shelf exactly in the place where it had stood before. Then she made three swift paces across the room towards the fire-place, and in another ten seconds, of the last Will and testament of the Earl of Bainton there were only left a few blackened fragments, fast fluttering into nothingness amongst the flames.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A LAST EFFORT.

“ After offence returning to regain
Love once possessed.”

—MILTON.

MRS. TORRINGTON could not naturally accompany Lady Camilla every day to Mr. Scarsdale's office in Lincoln's Inn. Besides, she had her own aims and objects in coming to London, and although she was glad enough to dine and go to a theatre with her cousin in the evenings, and to meet her at the breakfast in the coffee-room of the hotel where they were staying, she occupied herself all day in very different ways.

Her first day in Town, unfortunately, was productive of intense annoyance and disappointment to her, and as far as the primary business of her visit to London was concerned, she was rewarded only by entire and absolute failure.

On the afternoon of her arrival, she had employed herself in certain very characteristic and feminine preliminaries. She had visited her milliner, and had purchased a very becoming Paris bonnet. Later on, from a fashionable mantle-shop in Bond Street, she had issued forth, arrayed in a smart velvet jacket of the latest shape, trimmed with Chinchilla fur; new gloves, boots, and dainty little embroidered handkerchiefs were added to her already large store of such articles; and she ended her day at the hair-dresser's, where her fair locks were washed, curled and perfumed, and her fair face touched up by some mysterious process into a new and clever similitude of the bloom and freshness of early girlhood. The next morning, as soon as Lady Camilla had gone off to Lincoln's Inn, Dora first arrayed herself in her new purchases, and then concealed the glories of her raiment beneath a long cloak and a very thick veil; and these preparations being arranged, she desired that a hansom might be called for her.

Gilbert Nugent was standing in the middle of his chambers in the Albany, much as Marius is said to have stood amidst the ruins of Carthage.

Of those beautiful and orderly rooms nothing was now remaining save chaos and confusion. Boxes to the right of him! boxes to the left of him! Gun-cases, cartridge-cases, fishing tackle, all over the floor; clothes, boots, books, linen, on every available chair and table. Parcels that poured in from the tailor, the hosier and the boot-maker at every moment. A new saddle from Souter's on the centre table—a new pair of revolvers, glittering in their rosewood case, from Colt's upon the side-table—and in the midst of the hurly-burly toiled and slaved a much-be-driven valet, with his coat and waistcoat off and his shirt-sleeves turned up to the elbows.

The master, himself coatless, worked as hard as

the man, packing in everything he could lay hands upon promiscuously into a huge, half-full packing-case in the centre of the sitting-room. Through the open door of the room beyond, the bed, heaped up with more articles of clothing, and the dressing-table, strewn with brushes, razors and bottles, and all sorts of toilet implements, could furthermore be perceived.

"All this, Baines," quoth Gilbert Nugent, "must be ready by six o'clock to-night. The things for the hold of the ship, I mean. My light portmantau and the Gladstone bag, and the dressing-bag, and that square leather box yonder, may be left until to-morrow."

"That's just the trouble of it, sir," replied the perspiring valet; "if it wasn't for the dividing of of the things and the settling of which is to go where—why packing for the South Pole would be nothing but child's play! And who is to unpack and put it all straight for you, I should like to know?" continued the servant presently. "Who's to find your things again and brush 'em and lay 'em out for you, on t'other side of the world?"

"I am afraid I shall have to learn to do all that kind of thing myself, Baines."

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Baines, with a queer break in his voice; "Oh, Mr. Nugent, sir! why won't you take me with you? I can't abear to think of your having nobody to look after you."

"My good fellow, I'd take you gladly if I could afford it, but you see I'm going away because I can't pay my way at home any longer, and I shall have to work for my living; and in those new countries a gentleman must work, and can't keep a valet, you know."

"Oh, Mr. Nugent, I'd serve you for nothing!—that I would! Do take me!"

"No, my man," said Gilbert gently, not untouched by the man's devotion. "I would not

accept such a sacrifice from you, although I thank you heartily for suggesting it. You will have no difficulty in getting a good place at home, and a far better master, Baines, than ever I have been to you."

Baines bent low over the portmanteau he was filling; and one or two tears dropped silently down upon his master's shirt-fronts.

"Never one who will do so much credit to a servant, sir," he said brokenly, "or set off well-cleaned leathers and boots so well on a 'unting morning—nor one who could look 'alf so aristocratic in evening dress!"

And it was just at this juncture, and upon the utterance of this heart-felt testimony to Gilbert's virtues, that the bell at the outer door sang loudly.

"Run to the door, Baines—those horse-rugs and clothing from the Army and Navy Stores at last!" cried Nugent. "They swore I should get them last night. However there is still room to pack them into this case, thank goodness."

Baines went across the little outer passage to the door. He remained away for some minutes, but presently came again with rather a mysterious air, closing the door cautiously behind him.

"It's a lady, sir," he said in a whisper.

"A lady? I can't see anyone, Baines."

"So I've told her, sir. But she won't take no denial, and says she must see you, very particular, at once."

"What is she like?"

"I can't say, sir; she has got a thick veil tied all over 'er 'ead."

The colour rose to Gilbert's face. A lady deeply veiled! What wild dream was this? Could it be Helen come to take one last look at him—to bid him farewell once more? As the thought rushed through his mind—he more than half regretted it—the parting had been so hard, and it was over! Why renew so sad a struggle? Why reopen an

aching wound? And yet the thought that she should have risked so much—her safety, her very reputation—just to see him again, thrilled him at the same time with a strange sense of exultant joy. So filled was his mind with Helen's image, that it never occurred to him for a moment that it could be anyone else.

"Did the lady give her name, Baines?"

"No, sir. I did ask her, but she said she wouldn't give no name, but she thought you'd be sure to know who she was."

"Very well. I will see her. Show her in. And, Baines," he called out as the servant was turning to leave the room, "you go off at once to the chemist's in Bond Street after those bottles I ordered there; you can bring them back with you."

"Yes, sir. I quite understand."

The door was thrown open, and a thickly veiled lady, whose figure was concealed in the folds of a voluminous cloak, entered the room.

With outstretched hands Nugent strode forward to greet her.

"Helen!" escaped from his eager lips, and then he fell back suddenly, "Ah, no! Ah! it is you!"

A short mocking laugh answered him—the cloak slipped to the ground, she threw the veil from her head, and Dora Torrington—brilliant and lovely, but with a glitter that was not all of love in her eyes, stood before him.

"No, as it happens I am *not* 'Helen'!" she cried. "Not this time! Is it, may I ask, the custom of that fair lady—that newly-wedded wife—to come by herself to your rooms? I should have thought that the Countess of Bainton valued her new position too highly to be guilty of such Bohemian practices."

"I must request you to leave that lady out of your conversation," said Nugent, angrily, deeply annoyed with himself for having let fall her name in his mistaken agitation.

"Oh, certainly! Anything for a quiet life, my dear boy! But what on earth is the meaning of this chaos?" she cried, casting rapid glances around the disordered room, "what are you about?"

"You see, I am packing up," he said coldly.

"Packing up! Why, where in the world are you going?"

"Did I not tell you in my letter? I am going to New Zealand. My passage to Auckland is taken in the *Zenobia*. I start the day after to-morrow."

"Not so fast, Gilbert! not so fast! I really cannot consent to your exiling yourself from your country—and from me—in this foolish fashion!"

"I am afraid that I shall have to dispense with your consent—much as I may regret that I am unable to obtain it."

"That is nonsense!" she cried, furious at his cold and sarcastic words and manner, "utter nonsense! You cannot shake me off in this easy manner—you are bound to me by too many ties—too many vows. You wrote of remaining away for three years?"

"I have changed my mind since I said so."

"You have changed your mind?"

"I am never coming back."

"Gilbert! Gilbert!" she cried distractedly, and flinging herself down upon the sofa, she burst into a passion of loud sobs, that were not perhaps quite genuine. She had never seen him in this cold, hard mood before, she did not quite believe in it now, she was certain that she might melt him by her well-timed grief—that she would still be able to have her way with him.

But her tears did not touch him.

"My dear Dora," he said quietly, "pray control yourself and listen to common sense. Did I not explain to you fully in my letter that all that was to be at an end? We have had enough of this farce, you and I. Years ago I would have married

you without a penny—would have worked for you, have devoted my life to you. But you would not have me. You would not marry a poor man, you were worldly-wise. I do not blame you. I dare say I was not worth facing poverty with. You said we were to wait till I got my uncle's money, a chance that was always a remote one. Well—what happened? we did wait—for six long and weary years, till my love and my patience alike were worn out, and then I had the misfortune to offend my uncle, and he left his money to someone else."

"To that woman, who has supplanted me!"

"He had a perfect right to leave his money to whom he pleased," he continued, coldly, "but to you it makes surely all the difference. I am what I was when you did me the honour to refuse to become my wife before—a poor man, hampered by debts, and unable to support a smart lady of fashion in that luxury which is no doubt her due. Why cannot you accept the situation? Why do you want to keep me still dangling idly at your side when I have not the faintest chance of ever being able to marry you? Do you not see that your position with regard to me is injuring you in the eyes of the world—is fatal to your chances of making a good marriage? and is, moreover—if you will forgive my saying so—ruinous to your reputation!"

"And what if I care for none of these things?—if I have no desire to marry any one?—what if I am wholly indifferent to what the world says?" she cried impetuously.

"No woman can afford to be that," he replied gravely.

She came close to him, stretched up her arms and wound them about his neck. He strove to shake her off, but she clung to him; all the anger had gone out of her face, only the longing and the tenderness remained.

"I can—I can," she cried with emotion, "because I love you, Gilbert—because you are still more than all the world to me—because if you go away and leave me I shall die."

"I am obliged to go."

"Then for pity's sake take me with you, Gilbert. I have loved you for so many years—you cannot throw me over now—you cannot!"

"Have I not told you already that it must end, Dora? Why do you give yourself and me the pain of this explanation? Why do you force me to say again what I have told you before—that I no longer love you?"

She fell back from him weeping. "Oh! have men no hearts?" she wailed.

"I do not think, Dora, there has been for some time past as much heart, as vanity, in your feeling towards me!"

"You are ungenerous! And see," she cried, with a sudden energy, "I will prove to you that you are mistaken—that I love you truly. Poor as you are I will marry you, and I will go with you to the other side of the world. Get a special license, and we will be married to-morrow. I will give up everything—my friends, my country—everything I care about, and I will come with you and try to be a good wife to you in your new life. *Now* do you believe that I love you unselfishly? *Now* do you understand what you are to me?"

There was a short silence. She stood before him breathless with anxiety. She meant what she said, every word of it! The homage she had received from him for so long was so sweet to her that she was prepared to sacrifice everything sooner than lose it. For the first time she was offering to him of her own free will what in the early days of their friendship he had pleaded for often on his knees in vain. She devoured his face with her eyes, whilst he, sombre and gloomy, with

a frowning brow and head bent down, stood sternly, almost forbiddingly, silent.

At length he lifted his eyes and looked at her. There was something worse than anger in them—there was contempt.

“You do me a great honour, Mrs. Torrington,” he said, in slow, measured words of scorn, “and I am grateful to you for the flattering proposal you have made me. I must, however, decline to avail myself of your generosity. I have no intention of marrying at all, and—forgive me for adding—if I had, I should have no desire to make *you* my wife.”

For a moment she was speechless with anger—then, like a mad woman, she burst forth into a perfect torrent of invectives, calling him, in her blind fury, by every violent name that she could hurl at him.

Then gathering her cloak, with a wild gesture, about her, she turned her back upon him and left him, slamming the door loudly behind her as she went.

CHAPTER XXXV

MR. WARNE LOSES HIS TEMPER.

“Now will I show myself to be more knave than fool.”

—CHRIS MARLOWE.

HELEN had but little leisure to spend in mourning over her lost happiness during the days that followed her last farewell to the man she loved so hopelessly. Her husband and his illness took up her whole time. He was still in great and constant danger, and it seemed often doubtful whether he would live or die. Necessity quickly made her helpful and efficient in the sick room. Bainton liked to have her near him, to feel the touch of her soft hands, and to murmur a few low words of endearment to her as she bent over his bed with food or medicine. If he was too weak even for this, his

eyes could still follow her graceful figure as she moved about the room, with the pathetic wistfulness of a dog-like affection.

In all her own private sorrow and remorse she was deeply touched and sincerely grateful to him, rejoicing to think that she could do something for him, who had done so much for her. As the days went by, too, the first keen edge of her regret and her despair wore off, and she resigned herself to her fate. She was happier after she had read in the Shipping Intelligence that the *Zenobia* had sailed. It made it easier for her to bear when she knew for certain that Nugent was actually gone, and that she could never see him again.

She flung herself with ardour into all the small details of nursing, and grew at last to feel as though the world itself had no wider horizon than the four walls of the sick room, no other interest beyond the rise and fall of the invalid's temperature, the due administrations of his medicines, and the anxious consideration of the delicacies with which it would be possible to tempt his feeble appetite.

In the course of these entirely wife-like ministrations, Lady Bainton managed to fall out with the nurse. She had never really liked or trusted her. At last she found her out in some trifling act of negligence, and it was the work of one day to report her conduct to Sir Augustus Rolls, and to request him to substitute another.

Mrs. Hogan departed at nightfall, vowing vengeance against her, and Helen, all unconscious of the enemy that she had made, congratulated herself on having got rid of her so quickly and easily.

Sir Augustus Rolls no longer regarded her now with suspicious disapproval. For, however mean the motives for which she had married him might be, he was forced to admit that she did her duty to the old man, and her devotion and tender assi-

duity to the invalid won at length his admiration as well as his respect. Sometimes too, for other reasons, Helen was tempted to feel almost glad that fate had played such strange tricks with her life, and had left her stranded in the quiet seclusion of a sick man's house. For she enjoyed now a complete immunity from Frederick Warne. One reproachful letter from Miss Fairbrother did indeed reach her, wherein she was upbraided bitterly for her ingratitude and her cruelty to her dear and sorely tried nephew, but, as Helen failed to see where the ingratitude and cruelty lay, she very wisely determined to send no reply to the letter, and there the correspondence ended.

It would indeed have caused her something akin to amusement could she have been present to witness the rage and indignation at Aberdare House upon the arrival of the news of her marriage. Frederick, indeed, forgetting the high and lofty ideals which it had been his pride ever to act up to—at least before others—lapsed into the failings of the vulgar, and swore roundly and freely, and in the most unvarnished terms, at the lady of his late affections, considerably to the horror and consternation of his aged relative, who was fairly frightened out of her wits by the manly vigour of his language.

"My dear! My dear!" she cried, lifting her hands in trembling prostration, "pray, pray control yourself. Suppose any of the girls should overhear you, or the new pupil-teacher who only came last week! I make every allowance for your disappointment Frederick, but however badly that unhappy girl has behaved to you—strive to remember, my dear, that it is sent you as a cross, and that we must always bow meekly and without murmuring beneath the chastening rod."

The "chastening rod," did not reduce Mr. Warne to meekness in the least—in fact, his

aunt's words merely had the effect of diverting the channel of his wrath upon herself.

Why did you ever put it into my head to want the girl? It is all your fault, aunt. You should never have allowed me to waste my time upon her. You ought to have known that she was bad and false at heart, and utterly unworthy of me."

"My dear nephew, you are unjust to me," replied the old lady, feeling hurt and injured. "Many is the viper," she concluded sententiously, for she delighted in a metaphor, "that has been nourished and fed in the nest of the dove, and has rewarded its benefactor's care only by striking her to the heart," and Miss Fairbrother carried out her phenomenal illustration from natural history by slapping her own jet-beaded chest with tragic emphasis, thereby leading it to be supposed that if Helen were the viper, she, Miss Fairbrother, was undoubtedly the dove.

"It seems hard upon me, aunt, that I should have my affections trampled upon by a viper," groaned the young man.

"Vipers glide, they do not trample. They have no legs," amended Miss Fairbrother instinctively, and didactically, by force of habit, "and between ourselves, Frederick, you must confess that it is a greater disappointment to lose the money than the girl herself."

"I consider money as mere dross. Only an instrument to success, which in the hands of the wise can be turned to good account, and in the hands of the foolish becomes like chaff before the wind."

As there was no controverting such an admirable and incontestable statement, the conversation here languished; and Frederick went his way to his daily work, whilst Miss Fairbrother relieved her feelings by sitting down and writing to the delinquents what she termed "a piece of her mind."

Having done this and posted her letter, Miss Fairbrother sighed a little sadly.

"After all, I was fond of the girl," she thought to herself as she sat by herself in her little study during the long hours when her pupils supposed her to be reading historical and scientific treatises, but when, in reality, she was either dozing or dreaming idly over her past life. "Of all the pupil teachers I have ever had, Helen Dacre was the one I liked the best. She had no method—no order—she was dissatisfied with her life here, but she was gentle, and she had nice soft eyes, and a low voice, she did not rub me up the wrong way like that black-haired girl with the beady eyes, or like the new one here now with her rasping voice and long hooked nose. If it had not been for Frederick, Helen might have come back to see me sometimes, for I don't think she disliked me. Perhaps it was a mistake to have tried to make up a match between them—they were never suited to each other, and I suppose she only accepted him in the first instance for the sake of a home. When she came into the money, we ought to have given up the idea—but then it was a great temptation—a very great temptation. Frederick has such noble aims, dear fellow! and that money would have been the making of him! He would have made his mark in the world, would Frederick, if he had had a little capital at his back, whereas now, I suppose, he will have to go on plodding in an inferior position to the end of his days! Ah, it was a sad pity that he got no real hold over the child's heart when he had the chance, that is where the mischief lay, I suppose. She was imaginative, silly girl, and I suppose Frederick did not flatter her enough. Ah, well, life is a strange thing, and only to think of my little pupil teacher marrying an Earl! A—real—live—Earl!" she repeated slowly to herself more than once, as though not

altogether displeased to dwell upon the impressive thought, and then presently Miss Fairbrother dropped off comfortably to sleep and dreamt that Helen was kneeling at her feet entreating her to accept her whole fortune of thirty thousand pounds, tied up in a canvas bag, and that Lord Bainton was placing an Earl's coronet in gilt paper upon Frederick's head, in the background, and pressing upon him his family mansion in Portman Square as a wedding present.

The early days of Helen's married life passed away sadly and monotonously enough, and often she asked herself with a sort of amazement whether she could really be the Countess of Bainton, or whether she was not after all nothing but Helen Dacre, a friendless orphan girl, with no place and no home in the world?

And all these days the *Zenobia* ploughed her way through the ocean waves, farther and farther from England's cliffs, bearing away the man with whom the romance of the girl's whole life was bound up, and whose departure closed, as it seemed for ever, the chapter of love in her heart.

One day Lord Bainton grew suddenly better. The doctors began to smile and to prophesy great things, and there was a general air of revival and of satisfaction on every face in the house.

"We must get him abroad, Lady Bainton," said Sir Augustus to her; "as soon as ever he is well enough to travel you must take him to the South, it will be everything for him to escape the cold east winds of our English spring."

"And you think he is really better then, Sir Augustus?"

"There is a marked improvement in his condition."

"Do you believe that it will last—that the improvement will be permanent," she persisted.

"His lordship has a remarkably fine constitu-

tion," replied the physician evasively, not meeting his questioner's eyes.

"Sir Augustus, I want you to tell me something," said Helen gravely, laying a detaining hand upon his coat-sleeve. "I want you to be honest. Once before you were painfully, I might almost say brutally, honest to me.

"Lady Bainton, I entreat you to forget that occasion. I owe you a thousand apologies for my conduct, and I frankly own now, that having been a daily witness of your devotion to your husband, I see that I made a grave and unpardonable mistake concerning you."

"Pray do not apologize, Sir Augustus; you believed you were doing your duty, and I honoured you even then for your frankness, but I want you to be as frank with me now. You told me then that my husband was the victim of a fatal disease—of one, I understood you to mean, that was incurable. Was that not so?"

He nodded.

"Have you seen any cause to alter your opinion since then? Are you sure that the disease exists, or, if it does, that you cannot overcome it?"

After a moment or two of painful silence Sir Augustus answered with an effort.

"I have unfortunately no grounds to alter my opinion, Lady Bainton. Your husband's disease *is* a mortal one, and must one day have a fatal termination, but his constitution is a fine one, and he might—mind I do not say that he will, but he *might*—live for some time."

"What do you imply by 'some time'?" asked Helen, who had turned white to the lips at this verdict.

"A year, perhaps. Possibly two, not more."

She bent her head with a little catch in her breath.

Sir Augustus grasped her hand. "You must be

brave, and you must do your best. Take him abroad, he will enjoy it, and it will revive him for the time. Make his life as pleasant to him as possible. There is nothing else to be done for him. For you, my dear lady, tell me if there is anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," she answered after a pause. "Do me one kindness; write to Lord Bainton's sister, Lady Camilla Greyson at Oldpark House, and tell her what you have just told me. I should like her to know the truth, and she has treated me so unkindly that I do not wish to write to her myself."

"I will do so, to-night, without fail, and I will tell her at the same time that her brother could not possibly be in the hands of a better or tenderer nurse than his wife."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MRS. HOGAN RELIEVES HER CONSCIENCE.

"Suspicion always haunts a guilty mind."

—SHAKESEEARE.

LADY CAMILLA had gone back to Oldpark with a somewhat unaccountable haste. All at once she seemed to Mr. Scarsdale to cease to take any interest in her brother's will, and to be no longer eager to hunt up evidence that might in the future help her to dispute it.

"I have come to the conclusion that it would be difficult and dangerous to do anything," she told the solicitor, "and, unfortunate and deplorable as things are for poor Ted, I don't suppose they can be helped."

Mr. Scarsdale was dreadfully disappointed. It had promised to be a very nice little business for him, and he had looked forward to his share of the costs of the case with the greatest satisfaction.

"It's mean of her," he thought, "d—d mean!

She grudges the money. She was always a close-fisted one."

And he did his best to try and make her change her mind, and to re-awaken her keenness in the matter.

But it was all in vain. For some incomprehensible reason Lady Camilla did not seem to care any more about it. She went back to Oldpark, and told her Tom that it was impossible to find out whether Bainton had left anything to Ted or not, and, anyhow, there was nothing to be done, and that the boy must take his chances like other people.

Whereat, Tom, who was a peace-loving man, chuckled and said that he had told her so from the first. Mrs. Torrington did not come back with Lady Camilla. On the day her cousin paid the hotel bill and packed up her boxes, Dora declared that she was not tired of London yet, and removed herself and her belongings to a lodging in Ebury Street.

Lady Camilla could not quite understand her. It is true that she had not had much time or opportunity to enquire into her doings, having been too much taken up with her own affairs and her daily journeyings to Lincoln's Inn Fields, but still she was dimly conscious of the fact that the fair Dora was playing some little game of her own, in which she, Camilla, had no part or share.

She had been given an abridged and very much garbled account of the final severance with Gilbert Nugent and of his departure for the Antipodes.

"Oh, I am glad he is gone!" declared Dora carelessly. "I have come to your conclusion, Camilla, that the thing had lasted long enough. I went, of course, to wish him good-bye, poor fellow, as he was going away so far, but really I felt quite glad he was going. He talked a great deal of nonsense about his love for me, and he actually

wanted to get a license and marry me off at once within twenty-four hours, so as to carry me away to New Zealand with him."

"Did he really? I should not have believed it possible that Gilbert could have desired such a thing!" remarked Lady Camilla drily.

"Yes, he did, my dear! A mad idea, was it not?—and, of course, I couldn't agree to such a proposition for a moment, and then he said he should come back and marry me in three years—so foolish of him, dear boy!"

"Why, I always thought that was what you wanted, Dora."

"Oh, no, my dear, not now! I see that he is very sincerely attached to me still, but it would not be fair upon him to keep him waiting any longer, so I told him it must be farewell for ever, and he had better settle and marry out there. I had a dreadful scene with him; he *sobbed*, Camilla, positively *sobbed*! It was a terrible wrench to him. But there! I am glad I have broken it off, and I feel sure I have done what is right," she added piously.

Lady Camilla was free to believe or to doubt as much of this story as she chose, but, as a matter of fact, she never heard any other account of what had taken place, and it was only by reason of her innate knowledge of her cousin's character and peculiarities, that she came to any conclusion whatever upon the subject.

So she went back alone to Oldpark, and Mrs. Torrington remained in Ebury Street, and she failed entirely to extract any reasons out of her cousin for her refusal to return with her.

"She is up to some new mischief, I'll be bound!" thought Lady Camilla. "Trust Dora for that! She will never leave off her plans and intrigues till she is in her coffin."

As to Lady Camilla, she resumed her quiet and

uneventful life as the wife of a country squire, with her habitual serene sense of self-satisfaction.

She ordered her household, visited her poor people in the village, discussed the Easter doles with the clergyman, and went on her little round of social duties with all her usual calm and orderly regularity. Her conscience, strange to say, did not trouble her in the very least as to a certain action of hers in Mr. Scarsdale's back office.

Why should it trouble her? She had righted a wrong, she had made straight that which had become crooked, she had exercised the right of a deeply injured parent to work for her child's benefit.

If she ever thought about it at all, it was in this light that it presented itself to her mind.

In course of time, she received Sir Augustus Rolls' letter concerning the state of her brother's health. As a matter of fact, Lady Camilla had long suspected the serious symptoms which had only recently developed themselves in his case and she had always been of opinion that hunting and shooting, which of late years had become a great effort to him, were very bad for him. It was not so great a shock to her as it might be supposed to hear that his complaint was incurable. The letter told her also of Lord Bainton's immediate improvement and of his departure with his wife for the south of France.

"So far all is well," thought Lady Camilla, with satisfaction. "Poor, dear Bainton! It is very sad, of course, but now that he has been fooled in his old age by that wretched girl, he is lost to me as a brother! I could never consent to meet her or regard her as a sister-in-law. It is just as well that he should be out of England. Perhaps he will die abroad, and then Scarsdale will look for the Will and—it will not be forthcoming! Of course, as he would be the first person to be blamed,

he will not say a word—he will declare that he knows nothing about it—and that no other Will was ever confided to his care. She will be abroad ; she will learn that he has died intestate and she will receive her share of his property, and that will be the end of it. Yes, certainly, that was a bold and clever stroke of mine ; I don't believe I shall ever have reason to regret it—it was quite the best thing to be done under the circumstances."

All at once, however, her serenity and peace of mind were broken up in a very unexpected manner. She was sitting sipping her tea one afternoon in the old oak-pannelled hall, and smiling to herself as she counted up the days to the now fast-approaching Easter holidays, when her dear Ted would be coming home again, when the butler came to tell her that "a person" was wishing to see her, who had come to the back door.

"What sort of a person, Grant?"

"An elderly person, my lady."

"What does she want?"

"She will not state her business, my lady ; she says it is private and confidential, and can only be told to your ladyship."

"Hum—I am rather suspicious of unknown women who want to see one on business ! Does she look like a beggar, Grant?"

"Oh dear, no, my lady—not in the least. She is very handsomely dressed in a black silk gown and a velvet mantle."

"All a blind, very likely. However, I have nothing to do just now, so I will see her if she likes."

Presently the "person," who was decidedly elderly and stout, was ushered in.

Lady Camilla put up her long-handled eyeglasses to look at her, but was sure that she had never seen her in her life before.

"You wished to see me ? What is your business, pray ? and first tell me what is your name ?"

"My name is Hogan, my lady. I had the honour of nursing your ladyship's brother, the Earl of Bainton, through the greater part of his recent illness."

Lady Camilla sat up.

"Come nearer, please; I can't see you. You can take a chair. Well, Mrs. Hogan, what has brought you to see me? Does my brother owe you any money?"

"Certainly not, my lady. I was paid my money punctual, and I should never have taken the liberty of troubling you upon a paltry matter of money."

"What is it then?"

"It's a communication, my lady, as I have to make to you—a communication of great importance, and as has lain on my conscience ever since I left his lordship's service."

And then the woman looked at her fixedly and meaningly. Lady Camilla laughed and reached out her hand to her writing-table drawer.

"And for this 'communication' I suppose you want to be paid, Mrs. Hogan."

"If you please, my lady——"

"How much is it worth?"

"Twenty pounds."

"Great heavens! twenty pounds? Are you mad? You don't suppose I am going to give you twenty pounds."

"Very well, my lady—you can take it or leave it, as you like." And the woman got up as though to go.

"There can be nothing within your knowledge that is worth twenty pounds to me," said Lady Camilla doggedly. And then she thought about her brother's last Will, and how she had consigned it to the flames in Mr. Scarsdale's office; and felt secure in her own position.

"Ah, well," replied Mrs. Hogan, with an airy wave of her hand; "in course it's not for me to

say to the contrary—every lady knows her own affairs best, I daresay; but all I says, my lady, is that when a nurse as has the charge of a sick gentleman is made to wake him up out of a nice healthy sleep in order that he may be made to write his own name down upon a sheet of paper——”

“What!” exclaimed Lady Camilla, springing to her feet excitedly. “What on earth are you talking about, woman? You are dreaming!”

“Oh, very well, my lady—perhaps I am dreaming—and perhaps I’ve nothing at all to tell you. I’d better go I think——” said Mrs. Hogan with offence.

“No, no,” cried Lady Camilla soothingly, motioning her to a seat, “don’t go—sit down, pray. I want to hear all about it very much indeed, I assure you. Tell me at once what you mean.”

Mrs. Hogan sat down, and a broad smile spread itself over her fat countenance.

“I’ll sit down with pleasure, in course, my lady, but as to telling you, why that depends upon whether you are going to give me what I ask. I must have my money, you know, or else I shall keep what I know to myself.”

There was a moment of indecision in Lady Camilla’s mind. She put up her hand to her face—a torrent of confusing thoughts rushed tumultuously through her head. After all, what *could* the woman have to say that she did not know already? Was it worth twenty pounds to be told that Lord Bainton had made a Will in his young wife’s favour, cutting out her son entirely, when nobody on earth knew so well as she did how powerless that Will had now become?

And then Mrs. Hogan played her last card.

“Of course when a gentleman signs two Wills on the same morning——”

“Two Wills!” almost shrieked Lady Camilla.

“And when you listens—as in duty bound a

nurse should, behind the door—and you hears the poor gentleman saying to a lady as has no experience of nursing the sick, ‘I’ve no wish to do as you tell me, I only sign this under strong pressure,’ and then her new ladyship, as has no idea how dangerous it is to agitate an invalid, calls me in to sign my name,”

“My God!” gasped Lady Camilla, “you mean that after the first Will he signed another?—a second one?—a codicil?”

“I don’t know if that was the name of it, my lady.”

Lady Camilla flew to her secretaire, dashed open a drawer, drew out out a cheque-book, and filled in a cheque for twenty pounds.

“There! there!” she cried breathlessly, and pale as death. “Take it—take it—and now tell me all! Oh! to think of such wickedness—such cruel wickedness! Tell me everything you know—everything you heard and saw. A codicil! Oh, great Heavens—a codicil may undo everything! It may ruin all! A codicil!—my God!—a codicil!”

And then, overcome by such emotion as she had never experienced before, Lady Camilla for the first and only time in the whole course of her life, fell back in her chair and fainted dead away.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DORA'S "SECOND STRING"

“Get place and wealth; if possible with grace,
If not, by any means get wealth and place.”
—POPE.

DORA TORRINGTON sat by herself in her gloomy little lodging room in Ebury Street with her feet upon the fender, her eyes upon the fire, and an open letter in her hands.

It was not for nothing that the fair widow had

condemned herself to three weeks of Mrs. Blenkinsopp's "dining-room floor," with the horse-hair sofa and arm-chairs in the parlour, and the meagre painted deal furniture of the bedroom behind it. Not for nothing assuredly that she had endured ill-cooked soles and chops for dinner, and greasy slices of tepid bacon and weak tea for breakfast. She, who loved luxury and comfort, and Marshall's high-class cookery, would assuredly not have uncomplainingly endured these various discomforts had not she been sustained through them all by high hopes and lofty ambitions.

And now, at last, the battle was fought, the prize won, and the game was hers!

The letter that laid the heart, the hand, the fortune of Mr. Onesimus Bloggs at her feet was actually in her possession! Not five minutes ago the postman had dropped it in the letter-box, and Mrs. Blenkinsopp had brought it in to her upon a battered japanned tray.

No wonder that Dora's untasted bacon was slowly congealing in its own fat—that her watery tea stood getting cold, and her flabby toast was untouched!

Was she glad? or was she sorry? Glad that she had laid out so many shillings in going backwards and forwards to the Cromwell Road—shillings which she could so ill afford, but which had brought her in so munificent a return? or sorry, that all her hopes and dreams and vague longings after love and happiness were merged at length into the prosaic person of Onesimus Bloggs?

Bah! what a name it was! Onesimus Bloggs! Mrs. Onesimus Bloggs! Yours sincerely, Dora Bloggs! She repeated it over and over to herself in all its aspects, but there was no getting over it at all—it was horrible!

And she, who had been proud of her pretty name—of the good old family ring in the word

"Torrington," and who had longed only to alter it into the equally euphonious one of Nugent! It was a come-down indeed to—Bloggs!

She shuddered as she dwelt upon it.

But then, there was the money! and money, as we know, is like charity, and covers a multitude of minor sins.

The money in this case was right enough. She had no doubt there. She had been very careful—she had precipitated nothing—and she had watched her man with the utmost caution.

She had gone in the first instance on the strength of her primary invitation in the train, to visit the picture-gallery, in order to inspect the Turner sketches—perhaps, but for Gilbert Nugent's repudiation of her, she would have forgotten Onesimus Bloggs entirely—perhaps, had she been able in any fashion to win him back, the little, red-headed gentleman who had pressed his attentions upon her on the journey to Town would have passed out of her memory altogether. But when, stung with mortified vanity, and smarting under the lash of Nugent's cruel words, she had turned her back upon him for ever, there had come upon her such a rage of reckless fury—such a wild desire to throw herself into anything that should soothe and restore her shattered self-esteem, that she fell upon the first thing that came into her head, with a sort of hungry avidity. She would not go mourning for Gilbert Nugent she swore to herself—she would show him how little she cared—and she would show the world that she was independent of him.

And so in this hour of her baffled hopes, she bethought her of Mr. Bloggs' card, and despatched a little note to the address in Cromwell Road, which filled the small soul of her little millionaire with delight.

When she got there, she perceived at once that

Mr. Bloggs must be a very wealthy man. The large, well-appointed house—it was, in fact, two houses thrown into one—the rare and beautiful antique furniture—Buhl and Chippendale and Louis Quinze of priceless value—the rich and costly hangings and carpets, and the pictures themselves, which she had ostensibly come to see, all proclaimed her host to be not only a man of money but also a man of taste. She had taken everything in minutely, although discreetly, with her sharp and experienced eyes. Then she had accepted an invitation to lunch, and had been introduced not only to Mr. Bloggs' excellent French cook and unimpeachable wine, but also to his sister, Lady Mullins, an ex-lady mayoress, invited by her brother to play propriety for the occasion.

Lady Mullins had been graciousness itself, had coaxed and caressed and flattered her, and had, in a post-prandial moment of confidence, expatiated to her on the grandeur of her brother's country place, and of the sorrow it gave her to see two such beautiful houses and such an ample fortune as "dear Onny's," without a mistress at the head of affairs to make his homes cheerful and happy for him.

After that there had been frequent entertainments and festivities, at all of which Mrs. Torrington was an honoured guest. Theatre parties and cosy little suppers afterwards, friendly dinners and stately banquets, all at the expense of Mr. Bloggs, and all evidently got up and arranged entirely and expressly for Dora's edification.

And through these frequent meetings ran always the undertone of the ex-mayoress's gentle recommendations.

How much she wished that Onny would find a wife! How comfortable it would make him. He was so domestic—such a dear good fellow—so sure to make a perfect husband! If only he could find some charming woman worthy of him. Not

a girl—girls would hardly appreciate him—but some clever, pretty, and still attractive woman of the world. "She need not have a penny, dear Mrs. Torrington," continued the affectionate and assiduous sister, warming with her subject. "Onny has more money than he knows how to spend, lucky fellow! But she must be a thorough lady and a woman of sense and refinement, and she must be well connected, and do credit to him. Ah! they are not so easy to find as you may fancy!" added the good lady, with a sigh, in answer to some murmured commonplaces, which the widow managed to articulate, somewhat consciously, a word or two concerning the facility with which such ladies might be discovered. "A woman suited to make my dear brother happy will be indeed a pearl of great price. He is so fastidious, and his heart must go with his taste—Onny will never marry where he cannot love."

And now at last, after three weeks of these preliminaries, the millionaire had at length declared himself, and his letter of proposal was in her hands.

"It was not a bad letter, take it altogether. If it was not particularly sentimental or poetical, it had the merit at least of being honest and straightforward. Mr. Bloggs had admired her, he said, from the first moment he had set eyes upon her in the railway carriage. He was looking out for a wife—he wanted a wife with looks and good family, whom at the same time he could be fond of. He knew he was not of exalted parentage (his father had kept a large wholesale warehouse at Clerkenwell), but he had had a good education, and he trusted that his dear Mrs. Torrington would overlook his humble origin, more especially as she already knew his sister, who was his only living relative, and who had on her part made a perfectly respectable marriage. And he wound up his letter, by remarking that he wouldn't trouble

her to write, but would call for his answer himself at an early hour.

And even as Dora was reading the letter over for the third time, a brougham dashed up to the door, and a little foxy gentleman jumped briskly out and rang the bell loudly.

For one moment of real pain and bitterest regret, the handsome form of Gilbert Nugent flashed madly back before her—Nugent as he had looked when first she knew him, when his eyes had been full of love, and every tone of his voice a caress. “Oh, Gilbert! my love—my king!” cried the wretched woman, starting to her feet and wringing her hands together in impotent despair, whilst a mist of burning tears welled up into her eyes. Oh, why had she not been brave and true then in those old days when his young heart had beat for her alone? Why had she put his honest love from her with cold and selfish worldliness until she had taught him not only to weary of her, but also to despise her?

Ah, shattered dream of the past! Ah, wreck of all that was good and honest within her!

Too late now—too late! He was gone from her for ever. It was not the ship that was bearing him away over the seas—not the lengthening abyss of distance that stretched every moment between them—but that great gulf between souls that have once been one, and that are now set apart for ever by a mountain load of sin and error. That was what divided her for all time—Eternity itself—from the man whom she had first played with, and then dragged down, and who had now escaped from her for ever!

And the steps outside in the narrow passage drew near to her door—another minute and the anguished poignancy of her useless regrets were at an end.

Mr. Onesimus Bloggs, smiling anxiously out of

his watery little eyes, with his thin lips twisted nervously up under his straggling yellow moustache, stood before her with outstretched hands awaiting her answer to his proposal.

Well, it was some small satisfaction an hour or so later to sit down and write her news to Lady Camilla, to describe her prospects in glowing colours, the magnificent house in Cromwell Road, and the great wealth of her future husband ; to dilate upon all she had heard of his beautiful place in Warwickshire ; to dwell upon the luxury and the splendour she meant to live in ; the entertainments she would give in town and country, the manifold delights which the golden key of money was about to open to her. And then she was fortunate enough before she closed her letter to be able to add a description of the magnificent diamonds—two bracelets, a star and two rings—which Mr. Bloggs with prompt generosity ordered up, as a token of his affection, from his jeweller's, as soon as ever he had gone away with his Dora's consenting kiss upon his lips. The package arrived whilst Dora was still writing her letter, and added considerably to her pleasure and satisfaction in her decision.

"After all," she said to herself as she tried on the glittering jewels before the shabby little chimney-glass and turned her fair head from side to side to admire their effect, "after all, money is a splendid thing, the best thing of all, perhaps, and if I am clever and play my cards properly I have no doubt I shall be able to pull Bloggs up with me into decent society, and we shall get on very well together. The world is very ready to welcome wealthy people ; my friends will all like me very much better, and make much more of me than they have ever done hitherto."

Dora's intuition was right. Her friends, from Lady Camilla downwards, were delighted. They flooded her with congratulations and good wishes,

and presently, when it was announced in the *Morning Post*, how soon she was going to be married, they inundated her with wedding presents.

A month had scarcely gone by, when, in the presence of a large and crowded assembly, an eminently fashionable wedding took place at St. Peter's, Eaton Square. The church was filled with well-known and titled people, and the soul of Onesimus Bloggs swelled with pride at the many illustrious persons who had gathered together to do honour to his bride.

The reception afterwards at the Alexandra Hotel, given and presided over by Mr. and Lady Camilla Greyson, was a gay and brilliant assembly, and Mr. and Mrs. Onesimus Bloggs went off on the first stage of their honeymoon amidst the vociferous cheers and hearty blessings of a large crowd of well-dressed persons, most of whom had never seen the bridegroom and hardly ever seen the bride before, but who all promised themselves henceforward to become their best and most intimate friends.

Such is the power of money, and such the foundation of friendship in the hearts of that sordid multitude who, until the end of the world, shall flock in countless numbers to the worship of the golden calf!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ON THE RIVIERA.

“The air is full of farewells to the dying.”

—LONGFELLOW.

THE marble villa upon the shores of the Mediterranean lay silent as death under the star-spangled vault of sapphire blue. The moonlight flooded the long steps of the terrace, and the slender columns of the verandah with an unearthly whiteness, and there was not a breath of wind to stir the

drooping wreaths of vine and of jessamine that trailed their graceful festoons all over the façade of the house.

The windows stood wide open, for it was April, and already the warm southern sun had changed the breath of spring into a foretaste of summer balminess. All day long it had been hot and breezeless, whilst even now the heavy scent of the spring flowers hung heavy on the air.

From the long French windows opening upon the terrace, the yellow light from the lamps within streamed out in narrow streaks, and lay across the grass. Within the room no one was stirring, only the lamps with their bright-coloured paper shades, and the pretty objects of china and silver, and the embroideries and photograph frames, and vases of flowers scattered upon the tables, betrayed the dainty and luxurious taste of a woman's room.

Behind the shadow of the clump of mimosas on the little lawn outside, a youth stood watching the house. And as he watched he saw at length the slender form of a white-robed woman come slowly through an inner door into the warmly lit drawing-room. She looked tired and sad, and there were great circles round her eyes that told of tears and of sleepless nights. She wandered round the room, apparently in search of something, and as she turned from one to the other of the little tables the light fell fully upon her pale face.

"She doesn't look a bit different," murmured the boy to himself, "only just wretched! I wonder why the mater says she is so bad and has done so many wicked things? I don't think she looks a bit wicked—poor Nell! Only used up and dead beat." And here he walked quickly across the garden and went up the steps of the terrace. The night was so still that Helen heard the footfall, and came eagerly forward. She stood at one of the open windows and peered intently out into the darkness,

so that she saw the boy's dim figure as it came out of the moonlight into the shadow of the house.

"Ted!" she cried in a ringing whisper, "is that you?"

"All right, Nell, it is I. Am I in time?"

"Thank God, yes," she answered as she drew him into the room with both hands. "He has been asking for you all day long. I was so dreadfully afraid you would be too late."

"Oh, Nell! Is it as bad as that. Is there no hope?"

She shook her head sadly. "He is dying fast," she answered brokenly.

Ted sank upon a chair and buried his face in his hands. "Oh, Nell! He was always so good to me! dear Uncle Bainton! Why, it is only a few months ago that we were all out hunting together, you know, and he as jolly as ever you like, and enjoying it as much as anybody, and now to think he is dying. Oh! it's awful!"

"Dear Ted—don't cry! You mustn't indeed give way. He wants to see you so much, and it would upset him if you were to be like this. Just now he has dropped into a doze, but he will wake soon—he never sleeps long, the pain wakes him up—and then I want you to come in and see him. He has done nothing but ask for you ever since I sent you the telegram."

"I came off at once. The mater didn't want me to go. She said——" and then he pulled himself up and stopped short.

"What did she say, Ted?" asked Helen, laying her hand upon his shoulder, and then, as he made no answer, she went on—"I am afraid I can guess. She told you that I was a bad woman and had plotted to deprive you of your uncle's favour, and that my telegram was nothing but a trick——"

"Why, Nell! How on earth did you guess?"

Helen gave a little mirthless laugh below her

breath. "Ah! I am an enchantress, you see, Ted! and do *you* think me a bad woman, Ted—who only married your uncle in order to enrich herself at your expense?" And she took the boy's chin in her hand as he sat in the chair below her and turned his honest, ugly, freckled face up to hers.

"Dear Ted, I wish you would trust me! You were my only friend when I first came to Oldpark. I was so lonely and friendless. I should have been wretched without you. Do you suppose I've forgotten all those days? or that I could repay your brotherly kindness and sympathy by playing such a black, bad trick upon you? Did you ever know me do a mean and cowardly thing before?"

"No. You always did go as straight as a die across country," admitted Ted, with generous frankness. "Even the first day I took you out, when you were in such a devil of a funk, you never shirked it one bit, and a fellow that goes straight across country doesn't go crooked across life either. At least, that is my experience, Nell!"

Helen smiled at the characteristic simile. "Am I to understand then, Ted, that you believe in me and trust me?"

Ted clutched her hand impulsively. "I trust you with all my heart, Nell."

"Even if things—at first—don't seem quite what you wish? You still won't lose faith in me?"

"Never, Nell! I won't believe a word of what the mater told me. It's not that I care about uncle's money one rap. I hope I am not such a cad as to care about money!" added the boy loftily. "What hurt me was to think that you, who had sworn to be pals with me, and be like a sister to me, should be plotting and scheming to make uncle hate me and die without wanting to see me again—that's what made me mad!"

"Does it look like that, when I telegraphed to you to come out?"

"That's exactly what I said to the mater, but she wouldn't listen. She said you only did it as a trick, and that when I got here I should find you wouldn't let me see uncle or speak to him."

Helen took Ted's hand and passed it under her arm, his honest candour made her very happy, the indignation with which he repudiated his mother's cruel accusations and suspicions of her endeared him to her.

"Come then," she said to him, "we will go into his room at once, and you shall see for yourself whether I am such a monster as your mother makes me out to be."

Propped up upon his pillows upon a narrow bed, the Earl of Bainton lay dying. There was no more recovery possible to him on earth—the gasping breath—the livid greyness of the drawn and altered features—the sunken eyes—all told the same solemn story—he had not now many hours to live. Too weak to move even a finger—almost too weak to speak—still there passed a smile of recognition across his face as his nephew, deeply moved at the sight of him, came forward and stood by his bedside.

The boy had never seen a death-bed before ; he trembled and turned cold.

"Sit down, Ted," whispered the sick man faintly. "I am glad you have come."

Noiselessly Helen stole out of the room again, and left the uncle and nephew alone together.

For many minutes Lord Bainton said nothing, and Ted began to be afraid he must have lost consciousness, but the dying man was only thinking deeply—collecting all his remaining strength to say what he wanted to say to him.

Presently he began to speak.

"I dare say, my boy, you think I have been an old fool to marry a young wife when I had one foot in the grave."

"No, uncle. You had a perfect right to do as you liked," answered Ted stoutly, his clear young voice ringing distinctly through the silent room.

The thin fingers closed one instant tightly upon his.

"Thank you, Ted. Well, it is natural enough, isn't it, that I should leave everything to her? She is my wife. I love her; and you are not my son. My title becomes extinct with me, and you are not my heir in any sense of the word."

"I know that, sir. I never looked upon myself as your heir—although my mother——"

"I know what your mother thought, and what perhaps she has taught you to expect. I dare say it was reasonable enough—I should not have blamed her. I could have forgiven that. What I cannot forgive was her treatment of my dear Helen. That I swore I would never forgive—either in this world or the next. Well, I have made a new Will—it was on my wedding morning. Scarsdale drew it up, and I signed it just before the ceremony. In it I left everything I possess on earth unconditionally to my wife, and only a very small legacy to you. Are you very angry, Ted?"

"No, sir, but I'm glad you left me a legacy. It was good of you to remember me at all at such a time."

"Well, Ted, that Will will be acted upon the moment the breath is out of my body. Scarsdale has it. My wife is my sole residuary legatee—Venner, the parson, and Rolls, the doctor, are the executors. You are to telegraph to Scarsdale for that Will the moment I am dead, and I trust to you to see that no obstacles are raised by your mother to the provisions of that Will being carried out."

"You may trust me, uncle."

The fading eyes glanced at him quickly, and a

little flicker of excitement revived in them as they did so.

"You don't care about the money then, Ted? You are not disappointed that you are cut out by Lady Bainton? Mind, I *had* made a will in 1888, entirely in your favour! Scarsdale has got that too, I suppose, but it's so much waste paper now, of course, as I am married. You are not disappointed?"

"I should be a hypocrite, sir, if I said I was not. Of course I would have liked to have had lots of money—everyone does I suppose. But, I repeat it again, you have every right to leave your money where you like, and I'm so fond of Helen—she is such a good sort, and I don't grudge her one penny of it."

The Earl smiled feebly and pressed his hand once more.

"Well, my boy, you will perhaps find some day that after all I've not done you so much harm. You must be patient and you must wait, and if in time you find out anything to your advantage—why remember, when you do, that it is not me you must thank, but Lady Bainton, who did it for you entirely of her own accord."

This speech, of course, was quite enigmatical to Ted. In fact his uncle's voice became so feeble as he concluded it, and his words came out one by one so haltingly that he scarcely heard it all, or caught the gist of it.

He waited for a few minutes, but Lord Bainton's eyes closed and he seemed too utterly exhausted to say any more.

Presently, after what seemed to Ted to be a very long time, his eyelids opened quickly—a sort of spasm passed across his features, and he gasped out hoarsely:

"Helen! Helen! Come to me!"

Ted rushed to the door, and in another moment

Helen, pale and breathless, flew swiftly in and sank on her knees by her husband's bedside.

He just knew her—put up his wasted hand for one moment to her face—whispered her name once more, and then sank back into an unconsciousness from which he never woke again.

All night long they watched beside him—one on either side of the bed. He never moved, and only the laboured breath, drawn sometimes at long and uneven intervals, told the watchers that he was still alive.

And, just as the first rays of the rising sun fell in a glittering shaft through the half-drawn curtains across the chamber of Death, John Edward Ravenstoke, sixth Earl of Bainton, with a long, fluttering sigh, in which there was no pain or terror drew his last breath on earth, and was numbered with his fathers.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TED REBELS.

“’Tis pride, rank pride, and haughtiness of soul.”

—ADDISON.

“MY dear Ted, why on earth cannot you be reasonable and accept the situation?”

“Accept the situation! Why, you must be mad, mother—quite mad, to suggest such a thing!”

Ted was stalking about the room, wild with excitement and agitation; Lady Camilla was seated calmly by the breakfast-table.

The scene was in a London hotel—the Métropole, whither Lady Camilla Greyson had come on the previous evening to meet her son on his return from Italy.

Ted was crimson in the face; he could not eat any breakfast; he could not sit still in his chair;

he could only rampage up and down and run his hands wildly and distractedly through his curly hair.

"It's impossible! Impossible!" he cried for the fiftieth time.

Lady Camilla shrugged her shoulders.

"Not impossible at all, since it happens to be the case."

"But I tell you," cried Ted, stopping for a moment in front of her, "I tell you that my poor uncle told me so himself; he told me he had made a Will, leaving every single sixpence, with the exception of a small legacy to myself, to Helen, and that he had signed this Will on his wedding-day."

"Well, he must have destroyed it afterwards, because there is no such Will in existence."

"There *must* be! He said that Scarsdale had got it."

"Scarsdale declares that he has no Will in his possession at all save an old one dated 1888, which is, of course, valueless now, as his marriage annulled it. Your uncle has died intestate."

"But when I tell you that he mentioned that other Will to me also, and said it was now so much waste paper——?"

Lady Camilla went on sipping her tea thoughtfully. She was very angry with Ted. What business had the boy to interfere? Things had been arranging themselves admirably since her brother's death; everything seemed settling down quietly. The Earl had desired to be buried, where he died, without pomp or ostentation, in the sun-bathed English cemetery that overlooked the blue Mediterranean, and Ted, as was right and fitting, had stayed on in order to follow his uncle's remains to the grave. The widow had stated her intention of remaining at the villa for the present, and of spending the whole summer in retirement amongst the mountains of Northern Italy.

Nothing had been said about the Will.

What Mr. Scarsdale's feelings had been when he unlocked the safe which had contained the last Will and testament of his late client, and realised that it had absolutely and utterly vanished, may be conjectured, but will never be rightly known, because no one was present to overhear his exclamations of horror and dismay or to witness the subsequent perturbation of his mind. But if his thoughts were inscrutable his actions were decided enough. What the much perplexed and troubled solicitor did, was to telegraph to Lady Camilla, begging her peremptorily come to Town. Lady Camilla, who had of course expected the summons, obeyed it with, it must be confessed, a beating heart. She came up to London by the first train, and drove straight from the station to Lincoln's Inn.

What passed there between herself and Mr. Scarsdale has always remained wrapped in mystery and obscurity. But Lady Camilla knew her man, and had been prepared to play her game with boldness and with decision. Anyhow, although the interview was long and at one time very stormy, it ended in peace and harmony. Mr. Scarsdale became, in the end, convinced that he would not be the loser by holding his tongue concerning an unfortunate transaction, which Lady Camilla averred with much solemnity had been purely and solely accidental. She had, it is true—she confessed to him—found the key and examined the Will, but it was really quite by chance that, bending over the fire to warm her frozen feet whilst she had been looking through her brother's papers, she had dropped one of them—at the time she hardly knew which—into the fender, where a red-hot coal that had appositely fallen out of the grate in the very nick of time promptly and opportunely consumed it to ashes!

With this wonderful and far-fetched story Scarsdale found himself compelled to be content ; he had no wish to lose such a good client as Lady Camilla, and as there was now no possibility of restoring the destroyed Will, he deemed it wiser, for the sake of his own professional credit to hush the matter up, and to consent to be a party to her secret.

He wrote to the widow of his client and informed her that he had not got the Will which Lord Bainton had signed on his wedding-morning, and that it had never been committed to his care. He supposed that Lady Bainton, herself, must have it, but in case of no such Will being forthcoming he explained to her what her position would be, and that she would inherit a third of her late husband's estate, the rest of which would be divided between the next of kin.

To this letter Lady Bainton returned a short and a curiously apathetic answer. She had not got the Will, she said ; she had always imagined that Mr. Scarsdale had it, but, if he had not, perhaps the Earl had subsequently destroyed it himself. She could give him no information about it, but she was quite ready to acquiesce in any arrangements which were made for her, and was content to leave all business matters entirely to him. And she did not say one single word about the existence of a codicil.

Lady Camilla breathed again. Scarsdale shook his head a little over the letter—Lady Bainton's sublime indifference made him uneasy, it was hardly natural ; that she should be content to let the matter drop altogether seemed suspiciously strange but as to a codicil Scarsdale did not believe in such a thing at all, he had been told of Mrs. Hogan's story, but he was of opinion that it was nothing but a bold and successful hoax in order to extort money.

The days went by, and nothing happened. If Lady Bainton made no inquiries it was nobody else's business to do so. Matters seemed settling down, and everything was working well, when Ted came back and, by his impetuous and rash asseverations and protestations, threatened to overturn all that his mother had schemed and worked for.

"My dear Ted," she said to him, controlling with difficulty her rising temper, "you really are a child! Why do you interfere with things you cannot possibly understand? Leave everything to me, my dear."

"I am not a child—not such a child as not to understand what common honesty means—when a man almost with his last breath tells me that he has made such and such arrangements, and that such and such a Will exists——"

"My dear Ted, your poor uncle's mind must have been wandering! You say yourself he was in his last moments——"

"His mind was no more wandering than yours is. He was perfectly clear and collected."

"But, Ted, there is *no* Will. What is the use of going on saying it when Mr. Scarsdale, who knew all your uncle's affairs, says he has not seen one. I am sure instead of making all this fuss you ought to be delighted. Your uncle always treated you as his heir—now if you don't get the whole of it, at any rate you will come into a fair share of his money."

"I have no right to a penny of it, mother," cried Ted, emphatically, "and what is more, I will not touch it! I shall give it all back to Helen, as soon as ever I come into it. It is hers. It ought to be hers."

"Really, Ted, you make me very angry," cried Lady Camilla, fairly losing her temper at last. "How can you be so childish, and so silly! There is such a thing as law, as trustees, as all sorts of

formalities which you have no control over at all at your age. How can you talk of giving your fortune away? It will not be yours till you are twenty-one."

"If I may not do that," answered the boy doggedly, "I will not, at any rate, spend one sixpence of it. There are neither laws nor trustees on earth that can force me to take what I know is not mine, and what I also know to belong to someone else."

"You are positively insupportable, Ted! Wait and see what Mr. Scarsdale will say to you. He will be here in a few minutes. Ah! here he is—punctual to the moment."

The hotel servant ushered the solicitor into the room.

"Good-morning, Lady Camilla. Ah! my dear young friend, here you are back safe. Allow me to offer you my warmest congratulations upon inheriting your share of your late uncle's fortune," and Scarsdale held out his hand to the young fellow.

But Ted held his hands resolutely behind his back.

"You need not congratulate me, Mr. Scarsdale, because I shall not take my uncle's money; he left it all to his wife."

"My dear Mr. Edward, no such Will is in my possession,"

"Very well, then you had better institute a search for it," continued Ted decisively; "because he told me that you had it."

The solicitor looked uneasily at Lady Camilla, who was crimson with rage and mortification.

"Ted is very ridiculous," she said, with an attempt at playfulness; "he has all sorts of romantic and Quixotic ideas! I think we must pack him off back to Eton. One ought not to talk about business matters before boys."

Ted turned on her with a sort of fury.

"I am a boy, now," he said angrily, "but I shall not always be a boy! I will not touch my uncle's money, because he has left it, not to us, but to his widow—and because I promised him on his death-bed that I would stand by her and see justice done to her. And I swear before God, Mr. Scarsdale, if you do not produce that Will which Lord Bainton gave into your possession on his wedding-day, that the very instant I attain my majority and am able to act for myself in the matter, I will have you arrested on a charge of foul play."

And then he swung himself out of the room, slamming the door loudly and angrily behind him.

Lady Camilla and Scarsdale were left looking blankly into each other's faces.

"This—is—is very unexpected!" stammered the lawyer, who had turned as white as a sheet.

Lady Camilla laughed shortly and angrily. "Don't be uneasy, leave him to me. That wretched woman has bewitched him evidently!—but he will not be twenty-one for four years. I shall get him into a reasonable frame of mind long before then. What is more important just now is about that codicil. Have you heard again from Lady Bainton?"

"Not a line. She evidently acquiesces. She has money of her own, you see—she probably imagines that he altered his mind after the marriage. And the story of the codicil is, as I told you, a mere fabrication on the part of that nurse, in order to extract money from you."

"Wretched woman, I should like to give her in charge!" fumed Lady Camilla, who was thinking about her twenty pounds.

"Ahem, better perhaps—your ladyship will excuse me for quoting the saying—'Better let sleeping dogs lie.'"

Meanwhile Ted was striding away down the

Strand to a certain humble lodging-house, with which he was familiar in his little London excursions, and where sometimes he had had his letters addressed—bills he did not want his father to know of, and perhaps, occasionally, a little harmless love-letter or two.

Here he found awaiting him something that he had expected—a foreign letter, and, pouncing upon it greedily, he tore it open. When he had read it, however, he could not very well understand it.

“DEAR OLD TED,” wrote Helen. “do not be unhappy when you hear about your dear uncle’s Will being lost. There has been some mistake about it, but I know that you will be horribly upset on my account. Perhaps, however, things will turn out differently in the end. Just accept everything for the present, and keep quiet—and I want you to make me a promise. On the 10th of October it will be six months from the date of your uncle’s death—on that day I wish to see you. I shall arrive in England on the 8th or 9th, and will go straight to Portman Square—if you will allow me to put up there for a few days? Now I want you to promise that you will meet me there on the 10th. I have something of great importance to tell you, which must be told on that day. Meanwhile God bless you, dear boy—continue to believe in me and to trust me,

“Your affectionate,

“HELEN.”

Ted rushed into a post-office wildly, and, with the impetuosity of his seventeen years, sent off the following telegram :

“Will meet you Portman Square October 10th, but will not touch penny of the money.”

And then, as he walked away leisurely down the Strand on his way back to the Hotel Métropole, he said once again to himself, in the terse vernacular of his age:

"But I'm blowed if I can see any meaning or sense in it for all that!"

CHAPTER XL.

LORD BAINTON'S LAST WILL.

"While resignation gently slopes away—
And, all *her* prospects brightening to the last,
Her Heaven commences ere the world be past."

—GOLDSMITH.

IF six months be a long space of time to look forward to, it is often marvellous how quickly it seems to have slipped away when we come to look back upon it, more especially if it has not been marked in our private history by any very exciting chances or changes of fortune.

To the principal characters of this story, the six months that followed the death and burial of the last Earl of Bainton passed swiftly and monotonously away.

In London, Mr. and Mrs. Onesimus Bloggs had spent a season of fast and furious dissipation, and were now recruiting their forces in the so-called "seclusion" of their country mansion, which was crammed with a constant succession of guests from attic to cellar. Dora had rushed ardently into the gay vortex of fashion. Her dresses, her diamonds, her equipages, and her entertainments had been the talk of the town, and the joy of all those little society journals that delight in retailing the petty personal details of other people's concerns. The pretty Mrs. Bloggs was respectfully mentioned on all sides as a leader of fashion; whilst her ugly little husband, whom she dragged about everywhere in her train, and whose purse-strings she opened so

widely, was systematically and significantly ignored altogether.

Far away in New Zealand, Gilbert Nugent—faulty hero as he has proved himself to be during the course of this story—was putting his shoulder manfully to the wheel and trying by hard work, by patience and by penitence for the past, to render himself daily more worthy of a certain golden hope which had dangled faintly, far away upon the distant horizon of his future, ever since that hour when in an old copy of the *Times* of many weeks back, his eyes had alighted by chance upon a certain important notice in the obituary.

The six months for Ted Greyson had also been spent in hard work of another kind. Ted had developed in a very short time into a man, and a very decided man too. He refused to return to Eton, he refused to receive the ample allowance which his mother pressed upon him to take as his due, and he refused absolutely and utterly to live at Oldpark or even to meet Lady Camilla at all. Instead of leading the life of an idle young man of fortune, he begged his father to allow him to go to a private tutor who lived at a quiet village on the Devonshire coast, and who coached young men for the army and for the civil services. He was determined, he told his father, to enter a profession of some kind and to earn his own living.

“I know, sir,” he said to him, “that you have been in pecuniary difficulties for a long time back, and I know that Oldpark must soon be let or sold, and that I shall never be able to live as you have done upon the estate. I do not wish to be a burden upon you, and I want to make my own way in the world. If you will keep me and give me the means of working for the next two years, I promise you that it shall not be my fault if I don’t pass these examinations. After which, once started, I will never cost you another penny.”

"I honour your independence, my dear boy, but for the life of me I cannot see the object of it!" had been his father's reply. "Your mother now is in a position to make you a handsome allowance. Why, therefore, talk of a profession or of working for your living?"

Ted was silent for a moment or two. His feeling against his mother was one of bewildered indignation. He could not understand her. He believed that Scarsdale had made away with the Will for some reasons of his own, but it had not entered into his head to imagine that his mother was in any way an accomplice in his wickedness. But he was deeply grieved and disappointed to think that she had been so ready to wink at a possible crime and to take possession of a fortune to which she must know, at her heart, neither he nor she had any possible right. Nevertheless he did not wish to impugn her honour and rectitude to his father, to whom he had never disclosed his uncle's dying words, not caring to make possible trouble between his parents.

So he only said simply and quietly:

"I do not want poor uncle's money, father—I have told my mother that I will not take it; it is my firm belief that he must have left everything to his widow and that some documents will one day come to light which will materially alter the position of affairs. I would, therefore, rather prepare and train myself to become a poor man."

So Ted had his own way and went down to Devonshire, and worked hard amongst a number of young fellows, much to the sorrow of his mother, who mourned over his absence and over what she called his "ingratitude" with the bitterest pain.

Meanwhile Helen had found a temporary home amongst the olive-clad slopes of the Italian mountains. Far below her pretty villa lay a village,

clustering under the hill amongst the green meadows, by the side of a placid lake of turquoise blue, whilst opposite her windows a long range of snowy Alps recorded the rising and setting of the daily sun to her in a succession of gorgeous and ever-varying panoramas. She was for a long time quite alone here with her servants; and she was very sad and dull, and often she mused sorrowfully enough upon the hard lesson which life had brought so bitterly home to her—of the small benefit that money brings, of its futility—and of its utter powerlessness to give one hour of real peace or happiness to the soul.

“I had rather be a beggar, and have some one to love me, than a millionaire without one true heart to rest upon!” That was the constant burden of her melancholy thoughts. For what had her accession of fortune brought to her? that fortune which in her girlish ignorance a year ago had seemed to open everything in life to her dazzled imagination! Bitter enmity, rancorous spite and false and mercenary friends; but of that love she needed so much, only the faithful affection of one kind old man who was dead, and the impulsive partisanship of a boy who was too young to be any real comfort to her.

And what of that other, who was so far away at the other side of the world? What of him whose love had been fraught with peril, and whose soul had only looked into her soul once! and that at the very moment of parting from her for ever?

Was it likely that Gilbert Nugent, who had judged her so harshly and known her so little, would remain true to that transient gleam of a spoilt and wasted love. “Men change so quickly,” she thought as she watched the red flush of the sunset on the mountain tops pale and fade away into the evening’s blue and grey—“the first ardour of their feelings lasts such a while! It is like

yonder glow upon the Alps that is so splendid for a little time, but that is so soon over—there! it is over now, and all the glory of it is dead!”

And with a sigh she rose and closed the window, through which the chill mists of the coming night were already creeping.

One day her servants told her that at the little Hotel in the mountain village, where tourists, in search of the picturesque, combined with the cheap, often came to stay, an elderly lady lay very ill.

Rejoiced to find something to arouse her out of her idle and useless existence, Helen hurried down the steep hill-side to the hotel; and great indeed was her surprise to find in the sick lady no other than her old friend, Miss Fairbrother! The old schoolmistress lay on a hard bed, in a most uncomfortable little bedroom, and welcomed the sweet-faced young woman in her deep widow's weeds with positive rapture. In a few moments, holding her late pupil teacher's hands eagerly in her own, she had told her all her little history. She had given up her school at Aberdare House to her nephew and his wife. “A very estimable person,” she told her, “not at all young or pretty, but sensible, and has a little money (her father keeps a large linendraper's shop in the City!), and she will make Frederick a good wife and be better suited to him, I daresay, than you would have been, my dear.” And then she went on to say how she had thought she would set out and see the world before she died, and how she had been now travelling for some months, with Sarah the old housemaid from Aberdare House, as a companion and maid—but somehow the food, and the long journeys, and the foreign wines, none of them agreed with her, and she felt very unwell and quite unable to proceed on her way.

Needless to say that in a very few hours Miss

Fairbrother and her ancient Abigail had been safely transferred to Lady Bainton's comfortable villa on the mountain slope, where under Helen's good care and nursing the old lady speedily recovered her health and strength, and where it required but little persuasion to induce her to take up her abode altogether.

It seemed odd enough to Helen to be thus thrown back by the tide of life into the closest daily contact with her old instructress; it made her feel sometimes as though time had gone back, and the past year had been a dream! Only that now it was she who guided and led, and Miss Fairbrother who depended upon her, and who could not do enough to express to her her gratitude, and admiration for her. Helen was decidedly the happier for this new interest in her life.

And so to them all, the six months came to an end, and October began at last.

One morning Lady Camilla was surprised to receive a letter containing the formal compliments of Helen Dowager Countess of Bainton requesting the presence of Mr. and Lady Camilla Greyson at 52, Portman Square, "to be present at a family meeting of great importance, on Thursday the 10th of October."

Mr. Scarsdale also received a similar notification, and so did Sir Augustus Rolls and Mr. Venner the clergyman.

Great curiosity was awakened in the minds of all those who were thus mysteriously bidden to meet together in the unused town-house, which Lady Camilla persisted in regarding as her son's—but of which he had resolutely refused to take possession. Lady Camilla telegraphed to Mr. Scarsdale for instructions and Scarsdale telegraphed back that he feared some new and unforeseen event had arisen, and that decidedly it would be better to be present.

When the day arrived therefore Mr. Greyson and Lady Camilla repaired to London and arrived in Portman Square at the appointed hour, and the first person they saw on entering the large gloomy library, was their own son, standing with his back to the fireplace.

Helen, clad in her deep weeds, rose with a bow at the entrance of her sister-in-law, but did not offer to shake hands with her. The three gentlemen had already arrived, and a fourth, a well known solicitor employed as Lady Bainton's legal adviser, while behind them, in a shadowy corner, Miss Fairbrother, now formally installed as a companion to the young widow, sat by, a silent witness of the proceedings.

When the new-comers had taken their seats, Helen placed a small despatch box upon the table and unlocked it.

"I have asked you all to meet me here to-day," she said in a clear, sweet voice, "because I have here a paper of great importance which by solemn oath to my dear husband, I have been unable to make public until six months after his death. It is a codicil to his last Will," she added, raising her eyes and fixing them coldly and sternly upon Scarsdale, who grew livid under their significant glance—"the Will," she added slowly and meaningly, "which he made upon the morning of our marriage—which he delivered into Mr. Scarsdale's keeping, and which has—oddly enough—never been found at all."

"I never had Lord Bainton's Will," said Scarsdale hastily. "It is entirely a mistake."

Helen waved her hand. "It is quite immaterial now, Mr. Scarsdale, whether it is ever found or no. May I trouble you to read this aloud," she added, turning to her own lawyer, who was beside her.

The solicitor stood up. Mr. Scarsdale bent his head and trembled. Lady Camilla lay back almost

fainting in her chair with her smelling salts to her nose.

The lawyer began to read :

"I, Edward John Ravenstoke, Earl of Bainton, desire to add this codicil to the Will I made this morning."

It is needless to follow the words in detail. They were however clear and plain enough. After six months, during which the Will of the morning was to be acted upon, Lord Bainton, "by the special wish of my dear wife," left to her the house in Portman Square, and all its furniture, pictures and plate, and of the rest of his property one-third ; the remaining two-thirds to stand in her name in trust for "my nephew, Edward Greyson," to be handed over to him unconditionally by her, on his attaining his majority ; and until that date Helen was empowered to act for him, and was appointed as sole trustee of the property on his behalf. The family diamonds were also left to Ted, but were to be kept in the bank until his wedding-day.

That was all. It was simple enough, and yet it was sufficient. It rendered Ted the undoubted proprietor of an income of four thousand five hundred a year, and it left to his widow the more modest yet perfectly adequate income of two thousand ; and it took Ted's money affairs entirely out of his mother's hands and placed them in Helen's.

Her revenge was indeed sweet, and when Ted flung himself on his knees beside her and kissed her hand in an outburst of affectionate gratitude, she felt that she had gained all, and more than all, the reward she had worked for. For who now could dare to call her mercenary and scheming ?

Somehow the room emptied quickly. Scarsdale

and Lady Camilla, inexpressibly relieved to find that Lady Bainton had no intention of enquiring into the fate of the destroyed will, took themselves off together with a somewhat suspicious precipitation; and the others having shaken hands with her she was left alone with Ted, and with the lawyer who had undertaken to manage and arrange her affairs, and who had been told nothing save that the Will of which mention had been made was unaccountably lost, and who had no reason to suspect foul play.

"I shall stop here with you for a bit," said Ted to her. "At least if you will keep me as a guest, Nell?"

"For as long as ever you like, my dear boy," answered Helen smiling. "Your home can always be with me, you know, now. And Miss Fairbrother and I shall be very glad of your company. I expect that Mr. Reeve," turning to her lawyer, "will require us both in London for some little time yet, till all his business is settled."

"You are a real brick and no mistake, Nell," said the boy to her later, after Mr. Reeve had gone, and Miss Fairbrother had left the room. "I was utterly miserable before, for I felt my mother had no right to a penny of my uncle's money; but now I know it's all right, and that I shall owe everything to you, I feel as happy as a sand-boy. I wish though that we had gone shares alike," he added with boyish simplicity, and then he bent down and threw his arms impetuously round her neck and kissed her.

"Dear old Nell, how I hope you may be very, very happy some of these days."

"Perhaps I shall be," answered Helen with an ambiguous smile. "Anyhow, Ted, your good wishes shall bring me pluck, I think—and perhaps also luck!"

Her precise meaning was somewhat enigmatical

to Ted, who however went off, whistling contentedly, for a walk.

When every one had left her, Helen rose from her chair, went slowly upstairs and entered the little room half-way on the staircase, where she and Gilbert Nugent had parted. She closed the door behind her, and stood leaning against it for a long time buried in thought. It all came back to her: his grief, his love, his parting words; the very look in his eyes as he had turned to leave her.

The whole scene seemed to be so vividly revived that it might have taken place yesterday.

Presently, she knew not how or why, a conviction came to her that he loved her still, and that he was thinking of her now, at this very moment! Her heart began to beat strangely—She went hurriedly to her own room, and put on her bonnet.

Half-an-hour later a telegraphic message flashed forth from a central post-office on its journey round the world.

"Come home. I want you," was what it said. And Helen knew, as she walked homewards again with a lighter heart, that that message would not have been sent in vain.

THE END.

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